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ENTERED AT THE POST OFFICE AT NEW YORK, N. Y., AT SECOND CLASS MAIL RATES.

Vol. XXII.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, N. Y., February 6, 1884.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year

No. 276

TEXAS CHICK, THE SOUTHWEST DETECTIVE; Or, TIGER-LILY, THE VULTURE QUEEN.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON,

AUTHOR OF "CACTUS JACK," "DON SOMBRERO," "LADY JAGUAR," "THE SCORPION BROTHERS," "CANYON DAVE," ETC., ETC.



"IF THEY TRY TO CLIMB HIGHER, SHOOT BOTH!" TIGER-LILY STERNLY DIRECTED.

Texas Chick,

The Southwest Detective;

OR,

Tiger-Lily, the Vulture Queen.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON,

AUTHOR OF "IRON-ARMED ABÉ," "BARRANCA BILL," "CACTUS JACK," "LEOPARD LUKE," "LONG-HAIRED MAX," "DON SOMBRE-RO," "BULLET HEAD," "THE SCORPIO BROTHERS," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A TRAGEDY OF THE NIGHT.

A TEXAS prairie, which stretched to the four points of the compass as far as the eye could reach; a wide sea of green—but of grass, not of water; a wide level, broken only at rare intervals by scattered trees; a scene where nature held sway, except at one point.

Two wagons were crossing the green sea, following an almost imperceptible trail, for few travelers had been over the route before, and the white-topped vehicles furnished an element so novel that the antelope, grazing beside the trail, paused to look in wonder.

The sun set, and the train halted for the night. Men, women and children were there; pioneers seeking a new home beyond the circle of civilization, their worldly goods contained in the canvas-covered wagons.

When they came to a stand-still, a young man who had been riding a dingy-hued mustang dismounted, went to one of the wagons and assisted a young girl to alight. She seemed a mere child in years, but her development was that of the South, and her beauty something unusual, even then.

It was noticeable that the youth gave his aid with extreme respect and an air as though she was, by far, his social superior, even as she was in intellect, if their faces were a criterion.

Yet, his could not be ranked below the average.

"Another day's journey ended, Miss River-ton," he said in a cheerful voice, as though to encourage her.

"Yes," she replied, looking out on the prairie with eyes which seemed to see nothing at which she looked, "and another day's journey nearer the goal. I wish my confidence increased as fast as we progress, but I am not brave, Neal. I am so young, and you, brave as you are, are not old in years!"

"That is true," he said gravely; "but I come of a family noted for strength of character, and I hope I shall not prove wanting when the hour of trial comes. Surely my heart is brave enough. You have wrongs which must be righted—ay, and they shall be righted!"

The youth spoke with emphasis, and his strong hand grasped his rifle-barrel as though it was the throat of an enemy. Yet, his manner was not loud and boisterous; it was all the more impressive because of its quiet, subdued resolution.

One of the women of the train approached at this point, and the conversation was interrupted.

Supper was prepared and eaten. By that time night had closed down around them, and their camp-fire was like a fiery eye in the darkness. It was allowed to burn because they had encamped in a *motte*, and the guide declared that there was no fear of Indians. And, indeed, the Comanches had been very quiet for several months previous.

Two hours passed. During this time all except the children had remained awake and listened to the guide's stories, but the adults began to yawn and showed signs of breaking up for the night.

Miss River-ton came to her young friend.

"Neal," she said, "I never was so nervous in my life before. What has come over me I do not know, but it seems as though some calamity is about to occur. Presentiments are the waverings of weak minds, but I shall never feel at ease until I know this gloom which has beset me is not to be followed by a calamity."

"Have no fear," he answered, cheerfully. "Your feeling arises from the dark, silent prairie around us."

"But I did not feel that way last night or the night before."

"We all have our moments of weakness," said Neal, philosophically, "just as clouds pass over the sky, but when they are gone, lo! the sky is again clear."

"I wish this night was done!" the girl said, with a shiver.

"It will soon pass, and when day dawns your fears will disappear. Night is the time of gloomy thought, anyway."

"But I never saw another night like this. I seem trembling on the verge of a precipice. If—if anything should happen to me, let this mission of ours drop forever. There is no one after

me to care for what has occurred, no one whose life will be embittered as mine has been."

"It shall be as you say," Neal replied, "and I do not know as it could be otherwise. I could not force your enemy to disgorge; you, alone, can do that. My only way would be to seek him at the revolver's mouth."

"Not that, Neal, not that!" she said, quickly. "Bitterly as I have been wronged, I have no desire to shed human blood. The thought of it makes me shiver to-night. But I will not make you listen to my forebodings longer. Good-night!"

She went away and Neal lit his pipe, and, leaning against a tree, smoked thoughtfully. The girl was nothing to him except that they had undertaken to right a wrong together, but he was thoroughly in earnest in championing her cause, and at the end of their journey, if not on the trail, trouble might be expected.

Three hours passed. The camp was dark and silent. All the emigrants seemed asleep. A guard had been posted, but an observer could have seen his form reclining at the foot of a tree, as motionless as those who who slept by right.

The silence had been complete except for the distant voice of the wolves and note of the night-birds, but it was suddenly broken by the thud of horses' feet. The sound increased and came nearer, and then out of the gloom shot numerous riders and the camp was thrilled with the chilling whoops of Comanche warriors.

Quickly the emigrants aroused and the men rushed out to repel the attack. They were met with weapons which drank their lives until the slaughterers were as red with blood as were their hearts.

One of the assailants was dressed as a white man, but he was the leader of the whole and outdid the Indians in inhumanity.

The wagons had been fired and the light flamed up to illuminate the scene, falling alike on the dead and dying on the ground and the mounted murderers.

In the tall grass Miss River-ton crouched and watched with eyes dilated with horror, seeing her worst fears realized. Her presentiment of impending evil had been fulfilled and her blood seemed turned to ice.

The butchers paused when they could see no more to kill. The burning wagons sent up a roaring flame and the leaves of the trees scorched and withered as though in horror at the deed.

The white man sat in the midst of his allies and looked about for a corpse he did not see.

"Where is the girl?" he angrily demanded.

The Comanches answered in guttural, broken English, but the hiding girl could not understand.

"There is one missing," resumed the white butcher; "the girl for whose sake this expedition was planned. Where is she? Here is her ally," and he pointed to the blood-covered body of Neal, "but she is not visible. Search for her, you red hounds! Search, I say! *Carajo!* I'll have your heads cut off if she escapes!"

But the girl, spurred to energy by the terrible discovery that but for her this attack would not have been, crawled rapidly away in the waving grass; and by the time they had discovered that her body was not immediately at hand, she had passed beyond the light of the fire and was running at the top of her speed.

On, on! She knew not where; she knew not to what fate. She did not pause to think that a trackless plain a hundred miles wide lay in front of her; that she had no means of gaining food, or that she had not a friend in all wide Texas.

On, on! She stumbled and nearly fell now and then, but with the courage of desperation she still ran. The Comanches and their white leader seemed to have lost all knowledge of her, but she did not stop.

On, on! On to meet the many perils and privations of the prairie; on to an unknown land and an unknown fate!

Two hours passed. The burning wagons were nearly consumed and the red light fell more dully on the scene of slaughter. Outside the camp the wolves had come close, then nearer, until, with boldness born of success they rushed forward and began their horrible feast.

But, suddenly, there is a shout and a horse-man, a white man, dashes among them and with shouts and stinging revolver bullets scatters the vile pack.

Then he leaps from his horse and, with a pale face and staring eyes, examines each corpse in succession. Suddenly he utters a cry like that of a wounded beast. He has come upon one body which—God pity him!—he recognizes as that for which he sought, yet hoped not to find.

He flung himself on the mangled form with a hoarse cry.

"Oh! Neal, Neal! my boy, my boy!"

The smoldering flame in the nearest wagon hissed, shot up afresh as it grasped new material for destruction, showing more plainly the strong man who sent out the cry of his stricken heart so bitterly, and beyond the death-circle they dared not again invade, the wolves howled lugubriously.

But, as a little time passed, and they saw the last comer was like the dead except for his moans, they grew bolder and invaded the camp. Falling ravenously to their work, one thrust his nose against the stranger's cheek.

He sprang to his feet with a yell which sounded far away, his eyes blazing madly.

Then, seizing his long and heavy rifle, he sprang among the lupine pack and, swinging it "as though it were but a reed, shivered a wolf's head at every blow.

Very soon he was master of the field. Dead wolves lay side by side with dead men, and he, the only living thing in the death-circle, was covered with blood.

Thus, he knelt beside the body before mentioned.

"Neal, my son," he said, brokenly, "your life has gone out in its youth, and gone in a way which almost turns my brain. But, if you are gone, I, Jarl Belvin, live, and from this day I live only for vengeance. A white man led this band of murderers, and though I do not know him now, I will learn his name and have life for life though I follow him for years. There is a dark mystery about all this which I do not understand, but I will know it before I die. I will know and I will punish. I swear it! Oh! Neal, my boy, my boy!"

CHAPTER II.

ON THE ROAD TO DEERFOOT RANCH.

A STRANGE and unsettled road is often a lonely one, and the horseman who was crossing Deerfoot Prairie looked with interest as, emerging from a timber-belt, he saw another rider in advance. Then touching his spirited horse, he increased his speed and hastened to overtake him.

The foremost traveler was moving at a very moderate pace, and one popularly known as a "jog," and the distance between them steadily decreased, though he did not once look around.

Walter Latimer was resolved to overtake him, however, and when he drew near and saw that he was ragged, unshaven, and none too clean, he mentally explained the fact by remembering that he had expected to see a good many strange characters in Texas.

When quite near he coughed audibly, and failing to make the man turn his head, decided that he must be deaf. So he rode squarely beside him and edged directly into the line of his vision; but still the traveler jogged on and never raised his gaze from his horse's ears.

"I beg your pardon," said Latimer, in a loud voice, "but can you tell me the way to Deerfoot Ranch?"

For several seconds the man never changed a muscle, and then his eyes were slowly raised, and he replied:

"I kin."

Brief enough, and satisfactory so far as it went; but Latimer felt a little disappointed.

"Am I on the right road?" he shouted.

"You be."

"Perhaps you are going the same way?"

"I be."

The stranger had dropped his gaze to his horse's ears again, and was looking as steadily as though he saw a panorama of interesting scenes passing through their temple in their prior.

Walter had a chance to observe him closely, and improved it, while he took time to decide whether he should keep in his company or ride ahead of one who seemed so ungracious.

The stranger was not a remarkable-looking man. He was a trifle larger than the average size of men, and muscularly built; his face was broad, beard-covered and bronzed, while dirt and rags sat over him like a hereditary peculiarity of which he was proud.

His companion had discovered this much when he raised his eyes and looked fairly at Walter. Light-blue eyes they were, and of a cast which went at variance to his taciturnity; but this suddenly vanished.

"I take it, you're goin' thar, young feller?"

The question came so suddenly that Latimer could not avoid a start, but this was followed by a smile.

"Yes," he replied, "I am going to Deerfoot Ranch."

"Why?"

"Abbott Woodbank is my uncle, or, more properly, the brother of my father's second wife. I am from Virginia and am now in Texas for the first time, being about to make a visit to Mr. Woodbank. My name is Walter Latimer."

"Wal, we shall prob'ly become better acquainted then, for my quarters is nigh ther ranch. I am ther Texas Chick."

"The Texas Chick?"

"Yas."

"Rather a peculiar name."

"For Virginny, it may be. Hyar whar men is men, whatever their names, sech things ain't a tall odd. I am ther Texas Chick, but I never peep."

"I should judge not," said Walter, though he hardly understood what his companion meant.

"I'm a tough fowl, but I never shed a feather."

The Chick looked at Walter as though for cor-

roboration, and the young man did not disappoint him. Despite the unpromising opening of the conversation, he was rather favorably impressed, and he had already discovered that the Chick was not deaf. The fact that he had given cause for that belief, at first, probably arose from the peculiarity of his character.

They fell into social conversation by the way and each talked more freely. Neither seemed to have anything to conceal. Walter had come to Texas for recreation and to see the country. The Chick, on the contrary, was a Texan born and bred, and his home was where he chanced to lie down at night. His life was nomadic, but the last six months had been passed near the Woodbank ranch.

While thus talking the pair entered a wood which covered both sides of the trail. It was an ordinary event, for that part of Texas was far from being timberless, and they were jogging along in the old style when there came an interruption.

There was a crashing of bushes on each side, and before Latimer realized that trouble was afoot, half a dozen horsemen had appeared and he saw frowning rifle-muzzles covering both him and his fellow traveler.

New to such scenes he looked with blank surprise until a voice broke the silence.

"Stand where you are! We have you covered, and if you make a hostile movement you are dead men!"

It was an ominous command, yet Latimer turned with more of surprise than fear. The voice was plainly that of a woman, and he was not accustomed to associate the sex with such desperate deeds.

The speaker sat before him, mounted on a splendid blood-bay horse, but the animal sunk into insignificance when the mistress was seen.

Sitting proudly erect in the saddle, Latimer saw a young woman who was as yet scarcely more than a girl, for not over twenty years of life had she seen. She was a magnificent creature in every way, with a queenly form and a queenly face—a face as regularly-proportioned as an artist's model, with round, well-colored cheeks, a tempting mouth and great, brilliant dark eyes. Raven-black hair covered her well-poised head in profusion, forming a rippling crown which was, indeed, a glory, as the old saying goes. A scarlet riding-jacket fitted so as to show her perfect form, and a black skirt just showed one dainty foot as it rested in the stirrup.

Walter was surprised and dazzled by such loveliness, and forgetting how he had been brought to a halt, lifted his hat with the chivalrous grace of a Virginian.

A scornful smile appeared on her face.

"Enough, sir!" she said, haughtily. "Such an artifice will not save you."

"I beg your pardon," he politely replied, "but I am not indulging in any artifice. I have been taught to respect a lady, and see no reason for changing my practice."

The smile became a scornful laugh.

"I can swear you are a new-comer in Texas," she said, quickly. "Probably some offshoot of the false-hearted East has wandered here and taken all his habits with him. Divest yourself of old-fogy ideas, sir; you are now in Texas, and, whether you adopt our customs or not, we shall not adopt yours. I am not a parlor belle to be flattered and fed on politeness. Perhaps you are so ignorant of the place you have visited that you have never heard of Tiger-Lily and her Texas Vultures."

"I must confess I have not," Latimer admitted.

He glanced around him as he spoke, realizing that he was surrounded by some lawless band. The men at the rifles remained grim and threatening, and Walter was wise enough to know that if he began a fight he would speedily get the worst of it.

The Texas Chick kept his place, with hands down and a chew of tobacco placidly rolling in his mouth. He took it coolly, yet the young man did not think of associating him with this attack.

"You'll hear more of us if you stay in this vicinity," added the girl rider, almost harshly. "Any one will tell you stories to our discredit. They will tell you I am a queen of outlaws, and that the brave men who follow me are cut-throats and something else."

"Do you claim the name of Tiger-Lily?"

"I do."

At this point the Chick nudged his companion, and spoke in a low tone.

"Go light, you feller, go light. Ef you don't we shall lose our feathers."

"Z-b White, what are you saying?" the girl outlaw sharply demanded.

"I war observin' that I should not fight fur a hold on ther roost, an' that we had better roost on a tree over night than ter have any onpleasantness."

She was looking at the man sharply; but, evidently believing all he said, she turned again to Walter.

"What is your name?" she tersely asked.

"Walter Latimer, of Virginia," he pacifically replied, desiring no trouble. "I am on my way to Deerfoot Ranch, the master of which place

is my uncle. I propose to visit there for awhile."

He gave the details readily, for he felt attracted to the strange young woman, despite her position, and not at all inclined to terminate the interview abruptly.

"I know the people of Woodbank mansion well, and if you inquire when you reach there they may recollect hearing of Tiger-Lily. Ask them! They are, no doubt, dear friends of yours."

"I have not seen any of them since I was a mere child, but they are my relatives."

"And are you going there knowing little of them?"

"Yes, comparatively."

She remained silent for a moment, and then broke into a short, scornful laugh, though it seemed she could not laugh unmusically.

"I wish you joy. Tell them you saw Tiger-Lily on the trail, and they will give you any information you do not now possess. Old acquaintances are we; I know them all right well. Shall I tell you whom you will meet? There will be the grand, stately and unimpeachably-honest Woodbank, senior; his chivalrous, honorable son, Randal; his fair, ingenuous and charming daughter, Constance. You may also look with interest at her maid, Moza, a girl with blood half-white, half-Indian; and at one Pedro Lopez, a Mexican who is Woodbank's overseer. Honest Lopez! my heart warms to him as I speak, and I know you will love him well!"

She ended with her short, scornful laugh, and Walter began to feel ill at ease in spite of himself. She spoke with irony when eulogizing them, and for the moment he forgot she had openly claimed to be an outlaw queen.

He hardly knew how to reply, and a brief silence followed. Z-b White, as he had heard the Texas Chick called, looked steadily into his horse's ears, and seemed content to be counted out of the drama.

"I wish to make your entrance among these people as pleasant as possible," the Vulture Queen added, "so I will take measures to that effect. Since you are a stranger in Texas I will explain that we are desperadoes who live by robbing our fellow-men. You wear a gold chain on your vest, and I dare say a gold watch is attached. We will take these to remember you by; also, any money you chance to have about you. Your revolver—if you carry one—you can keep, after we have removed the cartridges."

Latimer's expression changed perceptibly.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "but the watch is one of more than a pecuniary value. It was my father's, and for that reason, I value it above gold or jewels. The money you are welcome to since you are three to our one, but I am anxious to compromise on the watch."

"No compromise will be considered," she harshly replied.

"I will send you double its value within a week's time—"

"We never hunt for birds in the bush. We take what we can get, and in this case we can get the watch."

Latimer's face flushed, and he looked at the six grim outlaws with an expression anything but submissive. Still, it was plain they could shoot him where he sat before he could draw his revolver.

"Don't think of it!" continued Tiger-Lily. "We do not desire your life, but we never show mercy when trouble is forced upon us."

"Forced upon you!" cried Latimer, angrily.

"No one desires trouble except you. You call yourselves outlaws, and I take your word for it and offer my money without a word, as well as double the value of the watch. Is that forcing trouble upon you?"

"It is, because we decline the offer. We will have the watch."

"Then, by Jupiter, you will take it from my body!"

The Virginian's admiration for the outlaw queen's beauty had disappeared before a stronger passion, and all his ready temper was at the front. He came of a race not inclined to submit to wrong and outrage, and, while cursing the folly which had led him to carry the watch exposed to view, he resolved to protect it to the end, bitter though that end might be.

The Texas Chick spoke warningly, but he did not heed it.

"This is folly!" said Tiger-Lily, more gently.

"Call it what you will, I shall defend the watch. I offer twice its value, but I do not part from such a remembrance of a kind father tamely. Is three hundred dollars less valuable to you than this watch and a murder on your hands?"

The girl outlaw did not seem at all moved by this appeal. Her expression, if anything, became severer than before.

"The Texas Vultures do not pretend to make nice distinctions. When they mark a man for death, he dies, when they say, 'We want your valuables,' they mean exactly that and nothing more. If you value your watch highly, it is not our fault, nor can we sympathize with any sentimental appeal. You have heard our demand. Will you yield tamely, or shall we compel you?"

"Yield tamely? Never!—and may perdition seize you all if you accomplish your purpose!"

Latimer made a clutch at the nearest rifle as he spoke, and tore it from its owner's grasp, while at the same moment the Texas Chick uttered a shout and jerked at his bridle. It seemed a signal for his horse to turn into a fighting demon, for it uttered a vicious squeal and charged at the Vultures with open mouth.

Walter hastened to reverse the rifle he had seized, fully resolved to send a bullet home; but before he could accomplish his purpose, he felt something fall over his head, tighten around his neck like a coiling snake, and then, almost in the same breath, he was plucked from his saddle and dashed to the ground, with a force which knocked consciousness for the time from his body.

CHAPTER III.

THE WOODBANKS.

THE Virginian soon recovered his senses, and finding himself both unharmed and unbound, struggled to a sitting position and from there to his feet.

He saw the Texas Chick sitting mournfully in the dust, with a rifle held at his head by a stout outlaw. The rest of the party sat idly around, except that Tiger-Lily was re-coiling the lasso with which she had subdued him.

His hands mechanically wandered over his garments, and he saw that money, watch and weapons had alike been taken from him. He looked at the Vulture Queen with a light in his eyes far from gentle.

"I see you have accomplished your purpose," he said bitterly. "You have deprived me of all I value."

"How that may be I do not know, but I think I have taken all *we* value," she calmly replied.

"Woman," he said huskily, "I do not know how you intend to end this affair; it may be you will leave me a corpse by the trail; but I swear that if life and strength are vouchsafed me, I will have satisfaction for this day's work. I know no where your gang herds, but I'll cross half of Texas to find you and strike a blow in return!"

"You won't need to do that," she said, laughing. "Ask honest Abbott Woodbank where we live, and he will tell you our home is less than two miles from his mansion, and bordering his land on the western side. There you will see Thornpath Chaparral, and there you may look for the Texas Vultures. Seek and you may find—I say *may*, for it is not safe to prophesy you will find us."

"Rest assured I shall look. I am not accustomed to tamely bear such an outrage as this, and I will be your bitter enemy; I swear it!"

"We shall be charmed to see you in that capacity; come to Thornpath Chaparral when you will. For now, however, farewell!"

She waved her hand to her grim followers, and, as one man, they wheeled and dashed along the western trail. Tiger-Lily rode at the head like a veritable queen, her movements as graceful as those of the splendid horse beneath her. They went with a speed Latimer had seldom seen equaled, and not until a curve in the tree-bordered trail hid them from view did he cease to look after them.

Then he turned to the Texas Chick, who still sat in the dust and chewed his tobacco. Somehow, Walter looked upon his course as cowardly, and he burst forth with angry vehemence:

"Well, you baby, how much longer are you going to keep that position?"

"I scarcely know, but I reckon thar ain't much need on't now. You look sorter riled, stranger."

Z-b had arisen and was looking curiously at Latimer's white face.

"Riled!" he echoed. "See here, my man, no more of that. I will not be laughed at. You saw the whole of the scene, and know what cause I have for anger. I am not so sure of your good faith, for I failed to see you fight in support of me."

"I tried my hand," said the Texan, good-naturedly, "but I got turned over an' rolled in the dust an' generally shook up. I ain't a glut-ton, an' when I saw chicken-cholera 'round ther dough-dish I sarter sold out my chance."

Latimer did not answer, and the Chick resumed, after a pause.

"We ain't bankrupt by this affair. Our hosses is left, as you see, an' our weapons are over yonder in ther grass."

"Regrets are now in vain," said Walter, getting the best of a passion it would do no good to show in empty words, "and we may as well ride on. As we go, I want to hear more about this outlaw queen and her men."

They went as he said, and on the trail Zeb told all he knew about the Texas Vultures.

To the west of Woodbank's mansion was Thornpath Chaparral. There the band, led by Tiger-Lily, had its home. They were said to be desperadoes of the worst kind, and had committed all kinds of crimes for fifty miles around. Such being the case, the question arose: Why had they never been hunted down?

The answer was simple, though to Walter Latimer it was scarcely satisfactory.

Zeb explained that the chaparral covered several hundred acres and was a perfect labyrinth. It was practically unknown by any one except the Vultures themselves. In many places the undergrowth was so thick that it could not be penetrated without some sharp instrument to cut a path. Into this place expeditions had before then gone after the outlaws, but not a soul had been seen. Either the Vultures avoided them in the thick way, or had some secret haunt in the bowels of the earth—a not unlikely possibility, since at one point the ground was broken and rocky.

An additional reason why they practically had their own way was that the country was wild, sparsely settled and, as yet, under no actual arm of the law.

The Texas Chick made all this as plain as possible as they journeyed on, but Latimer was far from being satisfied.

"You say you are an old Texan?" he abruptly questioned, at the end of the story.

"Old in experience," Zeb answered.

"Yes. Well, listen to me: I am not a man to bear affront or outrage tamely, and though I am a stranger in a strange land, I hereby declare war against this unnatural woman and her gang of cut-throats. I am going to hunt them down and have my revenge. In saying this I do not mean I aspire to be a butcher, for I am not of that kind, but I mean to have my watch back, and, in some way, repay these Texas Vultures, so called, for this day's humiliation."

"I'm afeard you'll find it a rough road ter travel," Zeb said, with a shake of his head.

"Wait! I am not a prairie-man, neither do I know aught about this jungle they call Thornpath Chaparral. Hence, if I find you as honest a man as I believe you to be, I want to hire you to help—to be my eyes and ears, as I may express it, my guide and trailer: in brief, to help me war against these outlaws."

The Chick looked at him a moment in silence, as though he doubted the evidence of his own ears, and then a smile broke out upon his unwashed face.

"Will ye do it?—I say, will ye? By the 'arin' painters, ef you will we'll make Texas howl! We'll put our best foot forrard in the chaparral an' jest make them varmints peep. We'll still hunt 'em; we'll run 'em down in dumb-hound fashion; no barkin', but solid work."

"Give me your hand!" said Latimer, steadily.

And then they crossed hands and the compact was formed, for weal or woe, and the Virginian believed he saw vengeance within his reach. The Texas Chick was a doughty appearing fellow, and a pair of brave men can do wonders.

They rode on and, at the end of half an hour, left the wood behind and struck a fertile prairie. They had entered upon the land of Abbott Woodbank and, only a short distance away, his house was to be seen; a building which was, indeed, a mansion for that part of Texas, and partaking of many of the features common to a first-class Virginia residence.

Beyond, the green line of Thornpath Chaparral was plainly visible, though, at that distance, it looked low and insignificant, a fact due to the depression of land common to a part of the outlaw's home.

The two horsemen rode on and soon reached Woodbank's house. There they separated and Zeb went on alone, while Walter rode to the mansion to make his first appearance for nearly a score of years before his relatives.

The first greetings were over and, in the light of a cordial reception, Latimer was beginning to feel already at home.

He found Abbott Woodbank as he had expected, a tall, fine-looking gentleman of sixty years, with all the grave courtesy of his Virginian origin; a man who could make a guest feel at his ease at once without a perceptible effort.

The same traits were possessed in a degree by the younger Woodbank, though his life on the southwestern prairie had given him a dashing, free-and-easy way which his teachings colored but did not hide.

Constance, the daughter of the house, was a tall, slender brunette, a good specimen of a Southern beauty, but not enough of a society belle to avoid a deeper color of face when Walter was presented.

For the coming of the handsome young Virginian was an event of importance in her life, and as they were but nominally cousins, she could not assume an indifference she did not feel.

Latimer did not desire to act indifferent. He saw a most beautiful young lady, and as he was neither blind nor stupid, he rejoiced that Woodbank mansion contained so fair a companion for his days upon the prairie.

So pleasantly did the hours pass, it was not until after dark that he summoned resolution to tell of his adventure with the Vultures on the road, but as he had arrived penniless, and must await remittances from Galveston, it was neces-

sary to explain at some time and he finally went bravely into the narrative.

The Woodbanks heard with frequent interruptions, and natural indignation, and the elder man, in particular, was emphatic in his denunciation of the outrage, as he was frank enough to call it.

"Here you see the worst feature of life where we live," he said. "We are so thinly settled that our policy is rather a defensive, than offensive, one. Take my property, for instance. We are liable to be attacked, at any moment, by the Indians from the north, or Mexican invaders from the south; and, in addition, here are the Texas Vultures, so-called, in our very midst. They live in a chaparral where even our best trailers cannot get at them; you must see the place to appreciate it. This affair is a sample of what we have to endure. I say endure, for we have, as yet, been unable to drive them out."

"And what of the female leader, who calls herself Tiger-Lily?"

"A sort of beautiful demon," said Woodbank, with a perceptible shiver. "I would as soon fall into the hands of the Comanches. She recalls a problem I have often considered in the past: Why do so many beautiful women live by crime? Gifted by that which, if properly directed, makes the chief glory of home, they go the wrong road. You see such cases all through the world. Take these accomplices of city sharpers and place them in the dock. Nineteen out of twenty are beautiful women and—"

Mr. Woodbank had become fairly started on an oration, but Constance interrupted him.

"Cousin Walter does not want an essay; he was speaking of that dreadful Tiger-Lily," she said, evidently unwilling to hear her sex criticized.

"One might as well talk at random as to think of getting at the Vultures," said Randal. "I have tried it, myself, and I have no ambition to repeat the experiment. Thornpath Chaparral is a perfect labyrinth."

"Yet, I intend to carry the war into the enemy's camp," said Latimer, firmly. "The watch I lost is of far more than a pecuniary value and I intend to have it back. I have enlisted a man called the Texas Chick to help me."

Randal laughed outright.

"You might as well have a child. Zeb White is the biggest coward in Texas."

"Yet, he claims to be a good trailer."

"Perhaps he is, but he would run like a sheep if he saw a Vulture. The only man I know of who would be of any use to you is Jarl Belvin."

"Jarl Belvin? Who is he?"

"A man you do not want," said the elder Woodbank, hastily. "I advise you not to think of him. He is a strange, morose individual who lives alone in a cabin near the chaparral. Some people believe him harmless, but I once had occasion to inflict punishment upon him and he hates me cordially ever since. I wonder that Randal spoke of him."

The speaker looked reprovingly toward his son.

"I didn't eulogize the man," Randal hastened to say; "for I know he would be pleased to cut all our throats; but the fact remains that he is a skillful hunter. But we will drop Jarl."

"Let us drop my misfortunes entirely, for the time," added Latimer. "Time enough to speak of them anon, while we can better employ our time now."

He instinctively glanced at Constance as he spoke, and the young lady again colored charmingly.

Latimer was favorably impressed; he had no desire to blind his eyes to that fact. This daughter of far Texas, who was his cousin only through a habit of speech, was pretty enough for any man to admire and love, and he was not sure but one feeling would follow close behind the other in his case.

At any rate, he was not sorry he had come to Deerfoot Ranch, though his experience had begun so roughly, by the way.

CHAPTER IV.

MOZA.

WALTER LATIMER slept well that night, and no haunting visions of the Vulture Queen came to distress him. Perhaps this was not as it should be, but it remained a fact that his first night at the mansion was a dreamless one.

He arose to find the work of the day well under way. Mr. Woodbank, himself, had an eye to everything, but really passed little time out of doors; Randal, nominally always busy on the ranch, spent about half his time in hunting; while Pedro Lopez, the Mexican overseer, was the active manager of all.

When breakfast was over, Walter found that some one had made arrangements for him to see the immediate part of the place under Constance's guidance, and when this was understood he saw Randal go out and felt no sorrow.

But before he left the house his attention was drawn to where the young man stood talking with a tall, dark-complexioned fellow of such

unmistakable characteristics that he could not doubt but what it was the Mexican overseer.

He had a fine form, being tall, erect, and well proportioned; but from the first Latimer felt that they would not be friends. Perhaps it was an acknowledged prejudice against Pedro's nationality, but seemed to Walter like a serpent that had crawled into Paradise.

The cloud rolled back, however, when Constance made her appearance, prepared for their stroll, and they went out together. It was a pleasant period in the young man's life. He forgot the adventure of the previous day, with its attendant mortification, and thought only of what was then before his gaze.

And it must be confessed he looked oftener at his fair guide than at the scenery before him.

They went on until, a hundred rods from the house, they reached a *motte* where Miss Woodbank was accustomed to pass much of her time. Rustic seats had been made and, sitting there in the shade, one could look away for miles toward the south and see an almost unbroken prairie. To the east was the wood where Latimer had met Tiger-Lily; to the west, the chaparral where the Vultures made their home.

Walter's frequent glances in that direction finally showed him a man moving along the edge of the undergrowth and it occurred to him that it might be one of the Vultures, but when he mentioned the fact Constance replied that it was probably an employee on the ranch.

Whichever it was, the matter bade fair to soon be settled, for as they talked the man walked steadily in their direction, only disappearing when a deviation toward the north hid him from view behind the corner of the *motte*.

After that Walter forgot him in the charm of Constance's conversation and half an hour passed pleasantly. An interruption was at hand, however, and it came in the shape of a woman's scream. There was something about it which spoke so plainly of imminent danger to her who had cried that Walter leaped to his feet.

"What is that?" he demanded, quickly.

"I believe it was that girl, Moza—my half-blood maid," said Miss Woodbank, almost fretfully. "Why can't the girl be still, I wonder?"

For the cry had arisen again, and this time with an inflection the Virginian would not disregard.

"Whoever it is, she is in real danger and I must not stand idly here. Come with me, Constance, and we will solve the mystery at once."

As Latimer spoke he drew his revolver from his pocket and ran toward the point from which proceeded a third cry, forsaking Miss Woodbank with more zeal than politeness, if her opinion was any criterion.

He had two hundred feet to go, and twice on the way that cry arose again. Then he broke from the bushes into a small glade and saw the expected scene before him. A girl was struggling in the arms of a tall man, and though it did not seem that he was assaulting her with any serious intent, it remained a fact that she was far from being pleased.

It was not in the nature of the chivalrous Virginian to look on indifferently when a woman was in danger, and he was about to spring forward when help came from another quarter. The bushes on the opposite side of the glade opened and closed before the rush of a large man, and a moment later, he who held the girl was seized and dashed to the ground with a heavy thud, the rescuer being the man Walter had recently seen west of the *motte*.

Then, as though the scene was panoramic, Latimer saw the new-comer standing with one foot on the first man's breast, while the girl hastily retreated a few steps.

Desired light came to the Virginian as Constance's voice sounded beside him.

"Moza, Pedro Lopez and Jarl Belvin."

It was enough. Latimer easily recognized the prostrate man as the Mexican overseer, and it was clear the rescuer was the person Randal Woodbank had mentioned as a suitable guide for the war against the Texas Vultures.

He now stood over the overseer like an immovable rock, and though his bronzed face was impassive, his powerful form gave him a look which suggested the fact that he was not one to be idly meddled with.

Lopez squirmed under his heel like a maimed serpent.

"Let me up!" he snarled. "Hound of a beggar! let me up!"

Jarl's face remained as impassive under the insult as it had been before.

"Be calm!" he evenly said.

"Calm! I will have your life for this!" almost shrieked the prostrate man. "A thousand curses upon you, let me up!"

"It is our overseer," said Constance, "and he will be killed by that terrible man. Come, let us go to his aid!"

She hastened forward as she spoke and Latimer had no choice but to follow her. He was not so sure his sympathies were with Lopez, though, for it seemed he had molested a girl and met with just punishment; while one glance at Moza was enough to convince the Virginian there had been no reason for the assault except what Lopez had made.

The girl showed her mixed blood plainly. Her short, plump figure was American enough, but in her dusky face was the trace of the Indian blood he had heard mentioned.

But, as Latimer would not see Constance move alone, he went by her side and the attention of the trio was soon fixed upon them; Moza looking frightened, Lopez uncertain and Jarl Belvin dark and sullen.

"What does this mean?" cried Constance, looking at Jarl. "Sir, how dare you molest one of our people? Let him arise at once!"

She spoke with the warmth of her impetuous nature, but Belvin's face did not change expression.

"Be calm!" he steadily said.

"Calm!" echoed Miss Woodbank, with anything but calmness.

"How dare you address me thus? I command you, let this man rise. You have no right here."

"No man or woman shall say where I go or come," said Jarl, his face like that of a statue. "Keep your advice to yourself, young woman, and don't meddle with what does not concern you!"

"I could kill you!" said Constance, stamping her pretty foot on the ground. "Cousin Walter—"

But Latimer was already prepared to interfere. "I see no occasion for further trouble," he said, pacifically. "Mr. Belvin, will you allow this man to rise while we talk the matter over moderately?"

"Let him lie where he is," said Jarl impassively. "The ground is the best place for serpents."

"I'll have your life for this!" hissed Lopez.

"Be calm!" his conqueror evenly replied.

"Let us discover the facts of the case," said Walter, anxious to deal justly with all. "Young woman," here he addressed the half-breed, "what was the trouble here?"

"*Madre de Dios!*" she exclaimed, "am I a slave that I cannot walk abroad without being molested by this wretch?"

Her hand made a sweep toward Lopez, who would have spoken had she not quickly resumed:

"I was in the *motte* and attending to my own affairs when Lopez came upon me. I believe he followed me here. I hate and would have gone away from him, but he called my name and said he had a message from my mistress. Then he came near and seized me, saying he would have a kiss from my 'pretty lips.' *Caramba!* he got a blow instead, and though I am a woman he got no kiss. I tried to break away from him and called for help, nor did help fail to come. The Chaparral hermit appeared and dashed him to the ground. It was right, and Jarl should be praised, not condemned."

The half-breed poured forth the words impetuously, and the flash of her dusky eyes betrayed a spirit equal to that of Lopez, but Latimer felt that it was a just indignation and turned sternly to the overseer.

"And what is your story?" he asked.

"The girl is a flirt," said Lopez, sullenly. "She has led me on and then turned cold when her work was accomplished. Her blood is bad and false."

"You speak falsely, Pedro Lopez!" Moza cried. "I never led you on, for I always hated you. My mistress knows that."

She looked to Constance for confirmation, but the latter looked to Latimer, as though his opinion was to settle the matter. For his part, he had no doubt in the case. The half-breed spoke with truth in her voice and face, and Lopez had no real excuse to give. He saw an evil nature pictured on the fellow's face and lurking in his voice, and had he been master of Deerfoot Ranch he would have told him plainly how he regarded the matter, but, being a new-comer in Texas, it was just as well to proceed moderately.

"In my opinion, the easiest way is the best," he said. "Quarrels are never healed by brooding over wrongs, real or fancied, and I suggest that Senor Lopez be allowed to rise, that Moza return to the house with Miss Woodbank, and that Jarl Belvin be held excusable for what he has done."

"I'll never excuse him; I'll have his life!" cried Lopez.

"See here, my fine fellow!" Walter could not avoid retorting, "you may thank your lucky stars to get out of the scrape so easily. If Moza had a brother on the ground it is likely that you would get a whipping for molesting her?"

"*Carajá!* no man can whip me!" the Mexican declared.

A cold smile crossed Jarl Belvin's face and he removed his foot from the overseer's breast. The latter leaped to his feet like a flash and, jerking out a knife, made a stroke at the hermit with the readiness of his race.

The blow did not take effect. Jarl moved his hand quickly and, seizing the would-be assassin's wrist, twisted the knife away and flung it over the top of an adjacent tree, displaying a power about his work which delighted Latimer.

"Curb your fury," he coolly said. "I have been ill-treated once on Deerfoot Ranch; it will never occur again."

He dropped the overseer's hand and the latter stood still, his dark face darker yet with baffled hatred.

Latimer felt that it was time to end the scene and turned to Constance.

"You are mistress here; I advise you to send Lopez about his business," he said.

Miss Woodbank looked reluctant, but Walter already had a strong influence with her and she spoke kindly to the overseer and advised him to drop the matter where it was, and try to forget it. He must admit, she argued, that Moza had rights as well as he, and Jarl Belvin had but interfered when he saw trouble, as any man was likely to do for a woman's sake.

Lopez did not answer at once and it was plain he was battling with himself. Perhaps it was his better nature against his worse one, but Latimer suspected it was more a question of prudence.

"I will obey you," the overseer finally replied, "but I want to say one word to this man here. Jarl Belvin, we all know you around here and know what you are. You have to-day made an enemy who will live to bring you to grief!"

CHAPTER V.

JARL BELVIN.

PEDRO LOPEZ spoke and, wheeling abruptly, strode from the spot without waiting for a reply. Moza looked after him with a frightened expression on her face, but Jarl Belvin smiled coldly. It was plain he cared nothing for his hatred.

Satisfied that he was gone, Walter turned to Constance.

"Remain with Moza, if you will, until I speak with Jarl privately," he said, adding, in a lower tone: "We must remove all seeds of discord if possible."

It was hardly a frank speech, since Latimer had an altogether different matter on his mind, but strategy is sometimes excusable. The chaparral hermit did not refuse to step aside, when asked, and under a broad tree they paused to finish the interview. The Virginian had not forgotten what he heard said about his present companion, and as he noted the great power which plainly dwelt in his arms he knew he would be a valuable ally in case he could be secured.

Yet, the man was not one to win confidence except so far as his strength went. There was nothing prepossessing in his face. It was a broad, square face, and the heavy beard which fell over his breast did not disguise the fact that the square jaws and firm mouth were indicative of an iron will and unflagging strength of character.

Over his deep-set, brilliant eyes, shaggy brows descended like a breastwork of war, grim, stern, aggressive; and over the whole bronzed face was a look of sullen, strong defiance. He seemed like a man at war with himself and all the world, one who would bate strongly and forever, and follow a purpose once formed while he had strength to push on the work.

Before that day more than one woman had looked at the face and shuddered; before then, more than one man had looked and thought, "That is the face of a murderer, whatever his record may be!"

Latimer, however, was not ready to acknowledge that the man was all black, and he made known his business without hesitation.

"They tell me you live in the edge of Thornpath Chaparral."

Jarl looked at him steadily.

"Yes."

"And that you are well acquainted with the wood?"

"Who knows that?"

"No one, perhaps; but you live there and should know something about it."

"Well?"

"Yesterday, I arrived in this part of Texas for the first time. On the road I encountered the outlaw queen, Tiger-Lily, and was robbed. All my money was taken, but this was a small matter compared with the loss of a watch which was worth ten times its real value because it was a gift to me. I am anxious to regain this watch, and the only way to get it is to penetrate the chaparral to the Vultures' lair. Can I hire you to take me there?"

He spoke kindly and expected a ready affirmative, but the scowling face of his companion never changed.

"No!" said Jarl, harshly.

"No?"

"No!"

"I'm willing to pay you well," said Latimer, not a little disconcerted by so curt a refusal.

"You haven't money enough to hire me."

"Perhaps these outlaws are your friends."

Jarl laughed harshly.

"Perhaps the earth stands still," he said, in the same manner. "You must, indeed, be new to these parts to think I have a friend. No; they are not my friends; I have nothing to do with them and want nothing to do with them. Let them steal and kill; I care not. Neither would I care if a plague went among them and killed one and all. It's nothing to me. Per-

haps I might be hired to lead them against Woodbank house, but not Woodbank against them."

"Woodbank has nothing to do with the case. I am acting for myself and it is a matter between us alone. I am already aware that you do not love the owner of this ranch, but that is no reason why we need be enemies. We are our own masters. Come, will you be my guide?"

"No!"

Not a muscle of the impassive, sullen face before Latimer moved. Jarl looked him in the eye and spoke as curtly as ever.

"You must have some reason for this."

"My reasons are my own and not your concern, but I will be frank enough to say that no man who breathes the air of Woodbank mansion can buy me. I hate them, one and all, from the haughty master down to the sleek and purring daughter who would have called her servants to seize me had she not desired to please you. To seize me!"

The man paused and laughed in his unmusical way, and then his face settled into its old expression and he went on scornfully.

"There are not enough men on this plantation to seize me; I defy them to try. Let them, if they dare; I'll make more sore heads than can be cured in a month. You ask why I won't guide you. Because you are *his* guest, and of *his* blood. The taint of the viper is in your veins and I'll have nothing to do with you. I curse your family and I curse you. Go back to your lily-faced charmer and think no more of Jarl Belvin. Keep away from me or I may kill you!"

The words were spoken with suppressed fury and the heavy brows of the hermit came down lower than ever over his keen eyes. That he was uttering no empty menace was clear enough, but Walter Latimer did not come of a race to be frightened by either words or deeds.

"How do you know you will, my fine fellow?" he retorted. "Don't go too fast, and don't harbor the idea that I fear you. If you ever try the killing game you will find me anything but a lamb at the slaughter-pen. At the best, Mr. Jarl Belvin, you are an ungrateful dog. I took your part a moment ago, when that cut-throat Greaser would have forced you to the wall, and now you snap and snarl, as I remarked, like an ungrateful dog. You need chastising, sir."

Latimer spoke with perfect calmness, and without any tinge of boastfulness, and a slight smile flitted over the hermit's face.

"You are no fool, if you do come of bad blood," he said. "I hope I shall never have to kill you, but keep you from my path. Keep away, I say, for the path is not safe. Keep away!"

While speaking, he had thrown his rifle across his shoulder and was preparing to depart, and as Latimer saw that further arguments would be useless, he did not try to stop him, but one last shot he could not avoid giving him.

"One moment, Jarl Belvin!"

"Well?"

"I am going to your cabin some day. Watch for me!"

And then the Virginian wheeled and strode away before an answer could be returned. He had been disappointed, but he resolved to see the man again and win him from his sullen mood.

Moza had waited with her mistress, and though Latimer had a suspicion that she had received a scolding, he could not but see that the half-breed's eyes were raised to his face with a grateful expression as he came up. Pretty eyes they were, too; like dark velvet, and her features were remarkably regular for one of her mixed blood.

The young Virginian spoke kindly to her, and then she moved after them at a respectful distance as they went toward the house. Constance's mood had changed perceptibly, and when Walter rallied her for having been frightened by the late occurrence, she said plainly that it was because Pedro Lopez had been angered and baffled.

All this was incomprehensible to Latimer, since he knew he had done no more than was right, and when Constance tried to explain, she made bad work of it and, trying to choose her words, selected them so poorly that he jumped to the very conclusion she wished him not to reach.

Lopez, according to her account, was a man of savage and revengeful disposition, and as he was very useful to her father, he would not want him offended, while it was impossible to discharge him, because her father was under obligations to him.

The more she explained the less clear her explanation was, but, as we have said, Walter drew his own conclusions.

Abbott Woodbank had strong reasons for retaining the Mexican on his plantation, and even stronger ones for not sending him adrift. Perhaps it was because he was useful to him, but it was just as likely to be because he was in the fellow's power.

A case of which he had lately known in Virginia led Walter to wonder if Lopez was the

richer man of the two, if, in fact, Woodbank had not allowed his property too much under a subaltern's management until the servant had become the master.

He resolved to know, if he could without interfering with other people's affairs, nor was the first chance long lacking.

He said good-by to Constance, in a light way, at the door, and then went away by himself. He had been released without remonstrance, and he was shrewd enough to see that his fair cousin was really troubled by what had occurred.

He lit a cigar and was moving aimlessly, nor did he observe that he was nearing the laborers' quarters until a man suddenly appeared in his path, and he saw Pedro Lopez. The overseer had had time to straighten out his garments since his discomfiture, but a scowl was still on his face.

"I am glad to see you, Senor Latimer," he said, with a glance anything but friendly. "I want to speak of what has happened."

The Virginian saw trouble afoot, and he saw, too, that Lopez was putting himself on an equal footing with him, and though Walter had little false pride he had no intention of recognizing the fellow as anything but a servant. He seemed more fit for a cut-throat than a friend.

Consequently he bluntly replied:

"Blaze away!"

"There was trouble in the *motte*, and you took the part of my enemies," said Pedro, his small eyes twinkling like those of a serpent.

"I remember something of the kind."

"Why did you do it?"

"Because they were right and you were wrong."

"Caramba, what did I do? Moza is a half-blood, young, pretty and saucy. I met her in the *motte* and tried to steal a kiss. What of it? Where was the harm? May not a man be free with those of his own rank?"

"A man can play with a mule's heels if he wants to, but he must take the risk."

"Carajo! you laugh at me!" cried Pedro, angrily.

"You are wrong; I don't care enough about this affair to laugh. Why do you rehearse it? I was there and saw it all, and as it was an every-day affair, let us forget it."

"We will not forget it," said Lopez, his serpent-eyes dancing like diamonds. "Carajo! we will remember, and, by Our Lady, if you were not Senor Woodbank's nephew, this should settle the quarrel!"

He touched his knife as he spoke, but Walter laughed scornfully.

"You are worse than an old woman. Quarrel? I have nothing of the kind with you. As for your oaths, if all that foreign rubbish was of that nature, they are lost on me, since I don't talk your lingo. Now we come to the knife affair. If I was not Abbott Woodbank's nephew, this, *this*, your knife, should settle the quarrel. Indeed! Hear me now, my worthy overseer: Attend to your flocks and herds, your grain and your harvesting, and not once think of putting a hand on me in anger. If you do, Pedro Lopez, I will drive your teeth down your neck!"

Latimer spoke with perfect calmness, but he left Pedro choking and chattering like a man in a fit.

"Carajo! how dare you?" he gasped.

"Dare? It's the simplest thing in the world. Such trifles don't count in old Virginia. Why, my man, if you were there you would probably get bottled up in less than a week. Men in your position don't go around there with threats and knives exposed, in your amiable way—not without getting put on the shelf. Now, Lopez, I'm a stranger here and desirous of keeping the peace until I get better acquainted, but when the ice is fairly broken, it won't be healthy for you to threaten. Do you grasp the hint? If so, good-day!"

At the last word Latimer wheeled and walked away, but as he was by no means sure Lopez would not assault him, he kept his gaze turned over his shoulder and was thus treated to a view of as fiendish looking a face as he had ever seen.

The Mexican was dark with rage and Walter knew he had made a deadly enemy, but he would give the fellow no satisfaction, believing he deserved punishment for his course toward Moza.

Had he known Pedro Lopez better, he might not have been so willing to be hated by him.

CHAPTER VI.

THORNPETH CHAPARRAL.

WALTER LATIMER was not a man to let what he considered a passing cloud trouble him, and when he met the Woodbank family at dinner he had almost forgotten the trouble with Lopez, or, rather, he deemed it too insignificant to be kept upon his mind; but after the meal was eaten the master of the house decoyed him to his private room under a pretense of showing certain curiosities, and after a pleasant preliminary talk, came down to what was plainly foremost in his mind all the while.

"I hear something unpleasant occurred in the *motte*, this forenoon," he said.

"Oh, no," replied Walter, calmly. "There were a few empty words, but it went no further than that."

"Yet Pedro Lopez is hurt?"

"No shots were fired."

"I mean his feelings are hurt," said Woodbank, smiling.

"Possible? Well I am glad he feels his shortcomings."

"You don't understand me, my dear Walter. I mean he thinks justice was not done him. You appeared on the scene when another man had his foot on Pedro's breast, and then arrayed yourself against him."

"I suppose Pedro was your informant. In that case, allow me to ask how he got over the fact that he assaulted the half-breed girl, Moza?"

"Oh! that was merely a playful struggle."

"Then I suppose her screams were playful ones, but they had an odd pitch. Uncle Abbott, I feel a little guilty to have so soon become mixed in a quarrel on your plantation, but if you want the truth of the affair, ask Moza."

"She is coquettish, like all girls."

"She wasn't with him," replied Latimer, dryly; and then he told the whole story from his point of view.

"You make the case look dark," Woodbank admitted, "but you do not know these low people as I do. Now, had I chanced upon the scene, I should have let Pedro and Moza fight it out. By to-morrow, I dare say they will be bosom friends again, but Pedro feels offended at your course."

"I judged he did when he said he would cut my throat. Pleasant threat, that was, my dear uncle. Now, if Pedro was my employee, I would kick him across the Rio Grande, where he belongs."

"No, no!" Woodbank hastily replied. "I could not think of such a thing. Pedro is an invaluable servant; in fact, I regard him more as a friend than an employee, and frankly, Walter, I am sorry this has occurred."

"In that case, I am myself; but I have told you who began the trouble. However, I did not come here to run contrary to your wishes or to make myself disagreeable, and from this hour Don Pedro and I are strangers."

"But that will annoy him still further. Can't you have a frank talk and put yourself on good terms with him again?"

"Good Heavens! you are not asking me to apologize to him, are you?" Walter asked, in amazement.

Woodbank looked confused and troubled, and when he spoke his manner lacked its old dignity.

"Lopez has not spoken of an apology," he said, "but one can talk kindly and smooth over the rough places."

"My dear uncle, if I had wronged Lopez, I would be the first to make amends, but now I turn my thoughts back I fail to see where I have done so. I was asked by a look from Miss Woodbank to settle the quarrel. I suggested the simplest way; that each person go about his, or her, business and have no further trouble. It seems to me I appeared there as an apostle of peace. Later, Lopez stopped me when I was taking a solitary walk and threatened to use his knife on me. I replied that if he tried it I would punch his head, or something to that effect. And, uncle Abbott, I'm afraid I shall do just as I said, if he attempts to stab. I shall certainly try, for I have no ambition to be carved like a turkey."

"I suppose you will have your way," said Woodbank, with a sigh.

"On the contrary, I shall not. Pardon me, sir, but if Lopez was not your favorite servant, I would either give him a chance to carry out his threat or whip him so that he would not use another knife for a week. You know the Latimer blood, uncle; they never were noted for forbearance with their equals, much less with such men as Lopez."

There was more feeling in the Virginian's voice than he intended, but he felt that justice had not been done him. Considering that he was a guest, it was remarkable that Woodbank should take the stand in the affair that he did. Servants are not usually rated above kinsmen.

Walter would have asked for an explanation of this remarkable affair, but he remembered the impression he had gained when talking with Constance, that her father was somehow in the power of the Mexican, and he had no desire to drive an old gentleman to the wall.

So, when Abbott Woodbank said they would drop the subject, he noticed the sigh with which he spoke and felt a strong pity for him; but the interview had served to arouse all his indignation against Pedro Lopez and he resolved to keep watch of the scoundrel when he could.

If his hold on Woodbank was no more than a pecuniary one, and his claim was just, Latimer resolved to see it paid and the fellow sent about his business.

Little did he comprehend the shadow that was over the prairie mansion.

During the rest of the day matters went on

as smoothly as ever. Abbott Woodbank had resumed his old, courtly manner and, referring no more to Lopez, did all in his power to make his guest enjoy himself. Randal took him out for a ride after supper, and during the evening Constance played on a guitar and sang those old songs which are so far superior to modern productions.

Again, Latimer nearly forgot the shadow of trouble.

During the evening, however, he noticed that Moza, the half breed girl, was acting oddly and as it occurred to him she might have something to say privately, he managed to get away from the others and meet her on the piazza.

"I wanted to see you, senor," she said, at once. "I have a note here which was given me by Zeb White."

"Zeb White?"

"The Texas Chick, senor."

Walter had forgotten the name, but not the sobriquet of his eccentric acquaintance, and it was with considerable interest that he unfolded a paper as soiled and uncouth as the doughty Chick, himself.

One side was covered with writing, and though each word and line assumed to have set off on a journey for itself, and in a direction independent of its neighbors, he managed to read the following:

"W. LATIMER. SUR! Ef you still hold ter ther skeme ter look up the Vulcher quen, I would Like ter C you att ther South Side o' ther Chapparral in ther Mornin', at ate or 9. Com' on an' we Will make them Peap."

"Yore gid,

"THE TEXAS CHICK."

Everything was plain enough except "Your gid," which needed a second reading before it would come out of its masquerade and appear to the world as "Your guide;" and the Virginian was really pleased to hear from Zeb. Although the Woodbanks had branded him a coward, Walter intended to test his knowledge of Thornpath Chaparral.

"Where did you see the Chick?"

"Just outside the house, senor. He was looking for some one to carry the note, and he called when he saw me and asked me to give it to you."

"Is he here now?"

"No, senor. He went away at once."

Moza spoke with respectful directness, and Latimer could not help noticing that she was unusually intelligent for one of her mixed blood. Except for her dark complexion and straight, coarse hair, he would not have known she had an Indian taint. He was so pleased, withal, that he was about to address her further when he remembered the trouble with Pedro Lopez, and decided to let Woodbank's employees alone in future as far as possible.

Moza, however, spoke as he was turning away.

"Pardon me, senor, but may I speak of what happened to-day?" she asked, in her respectful way.

"Certainly. What about it, Moza?"

"I want to thank you, senor. You were kind to me when I was in trouble and danger—danger, because Pedro is hot-tempered and unjust—and I am as capable of gratitude as any one. I shall not forget, senor, and I hope you may find a friend if you ever need one."

Her simple earnestness increased Latimer's previous impression, and he replied that he was glad to have aided her. His opinion of Lopez coincided with hers, which had plainly been expressed as delicately as possible.

He also asked her about Jarl Belvin, but it seemed she knew less than he had heard before. The man was a hermit who lived in the edge of Thornpath Chaparral and was seldom seen outside. Once, some punishment had been inflicted upon him by Abbott Woodbank, but there the matter seemed to have ended.

This was all Moza had to tell, so he left her and went back to the family.

At an early hour the next morning he left the house and made his way toward the chaparral. Zeb's directions for finding him had not been very definite, but it proved that he was on the watch when he emerged from cover and met Latimer at the chaparral's edge.

The appearance of the man had not changed. He had had time to cleanse his face of its mask of dirt, but the chance had been neglected and he was in as buoyant spirits as though he was dressed for a city ball room.

"I see you hev come prepared fur work," he said, looking at the Virginian's weapons.

"Yes. If Tiger-Lily appears to us to-day, I mean to take the offensive, myself. There is a risk to run, of course, but I think we have the necessary nerve."

He looked keenly at the Chick, who grinned and nodded his head like anything but a coward.

"You kin set that down fur a fact. We ain't ther kind o' fowls to peep, even ef our pumage gits rolled over edgeways. Ther durned Vultures can't cut the combs o' this crowd, I reckon. I have sharpened my spurs, an' when I fling my heels I shall tar mutton."

CHAPTER VII.

THE HUNT FOR TIGER-LILY.

If the Texas Chick was not a valiant warrior his own recommendation went for nothing, but Latimer preferred to wait and see how he would maintain his boast before giving him a medal for heroism.

Before entering the chaparral, Zeb explained its general characteristics. It was nearly of an oval form, extending north and south, and though thickly wooded in all parts was diversified so far as the ground, itself, went.

At the point where the wood began there was a bank all along the eastern edge—or next to the land of Abbott Woodbank. In some places this bank was forty feet high, in others, no more than five or six; but the immediate part of the chaparral lay lower than the prairie.

It was equally eccentric near the center, Zeb said. At one point a rocky ridge extended for some distance and was popularly supposed to contain a cave where the Texas Vultures lived. Ending abruptly, it gave place at the south to a lake, or pond, which covered an acre of land; a clear, bright sheet of water which was the only open place in the wood. South of the lake was a swampy extent of land, well wooded, but a most dangerous place to cross. No outsider had ever explored it fully, for search-parties sent against the Vultures had lost men there, sucked down to death in the treacherous mud.

Except for these three divisions, the soil of the chaparral was tolerably level and as firm as the prairie beyond, but everywhere were the thorny bushes which had thus far baffled all attempts to find the outlaws' lair.

"You seem well posted on the wood, despite its fame as an unknown place," said Walter, looking at the Chick keenly.

"Anybody will tell ye ther same, ef ye question them sharp," Zeb replied, "but they will mostly talk from general report. On ther contrary, I hev been thar an' see'd ther ridge, ther lake an' ther slough. I hev said ther way ter git at ther critters is ter still-hunt 'em—no peepin', no yellin' an' 'tarin'. Wal, I've been in ther chaparral afore now. Ther rich men o' ther vicinity hev lost enough horses an' cattle ter make them down on ther Vultures, an' thar is a reward for their captur'. Hopin' ter 'arn it, I onc't went a still-huntin' in byar. I see'd ther things ez I hev tole them, but I didn't see ther outlaws n'r ther den. Further than this byar, exponent don't say nothin'—ter use a legal phrase."

Walter smiled slightly and then shouldered his rifle.

"Let us go on," he said. "Lead me to this ridge of which you speak, and we will try for the Vultures."

Zeb paused to impress on his companion the fact that he was far more liable to become confused, and wander in a circle than to find the ridge at the first attempt; but, looking over the tree-tops to where a higher line of green marked the ridge in question, the inexperienced Virginian scarcely heard, much less heeded, him.

"Lead on and lose no more time," he said.

The Texas Chick complied with his usual cheerfulness, and the journey was begun. They descended the bank and the chaparral lay before them.

Before they had gone twenty feet Latimer began to see that he had no Virginia wood to contend with. A perfect wall of green lay before them, made up of the leaves of the thick-growing bushes, and when they tried to push through, thorns caught their clothing or scratched their hands.

Zeb looked over his shoulder and smiled grimly at sight of Walter's face; but both were thoroughly in earnest, and they pushed on as fast as possible. The outer world was soon left behind, and they stood in a mass of trees and vines, so thick that it seemed as though day was turning to night.

The Texas Chick showed commendable skill, however, and he pushed on, trying one way when another failed, and keeping surprisingly near the proper course, considering that the chaparral was pathless. Latimer soon lost all idea of the points of the compass, as well as his old notion about the wood. He now saw that it was a place where everything was hazardous, so far as he was concerned, and he was glad when Zeb sat down on a chance boulder.

"In heaven's name," said the younger man, desperately, "how do the outlaws get in and out of this place?"

"Wal, we reckon they hev a secret path, though it hev never been diskivered. Maybe, they fly over ther trees or creep underground."

"Don't be foolish."

"I'll try not ter," Zeb placidly replied.

"I begin to lose confidence," continued Latimer. "I have supposed the chief difficulty was to get my watch when we had found the Vultures, but I now begin to think the trouble will be to find them."

"Ef I remember right, I mentioned this before."

"You did, and I was fool enough not to believe you. Such a tangle as this I never dreamed of before, however. Are you sure we are going in a direct line?"

"No. Nothin' is sure in this place, 'ceptin'

thorns an' scratches; but I hev an idee we are about right. All we hev ter do is ter keep on an' never mind a few upheavals o' our feathers."

The way was resumed with the old result. Half an hour passed. On good ground considerable distance can be covered in that length of time, but as Zeb had to pause more than once to cut away impassable vines, they had gained a really insignificant distance.

But, if they were seeing little, they were not themselves unseen, as they were soon shown.

A series of strange sounds, like ghostly laughter, suddenly broke upon their ears, seeming to proceed from above them, and they looked up to see a strange sight.

Human beings were visible, men swinging from the tree-tops like monkeys, holding by branch and vine, and so ludicrously at their ease, as though lounging in hammocks, that Latimer looked in amazement.

His first impulse was to regard them as a part of the unnatural wood—spirits, or something of the kind; and before he could bring his mind down to a practical basis, the chuckling gave place to a human voice, and human words fell clearly enough on his ears.

"Look this way, my brave cavalier!"

Latimer did look, and quickly at that, for he recognized the voice, and looking, saw Tiger-Lily herself.

She, too, was making use of the vines, her whole weight being suspended from them, and so thick was her natural hammock, he could merely see her head and shoulders as she looked indolently down at him.

"I see!" he cried sharply; "and it is to find you I am here to-day."

"I am already aware of the fact; but you could never have done it without help from me. Give me credit for that. You wanted me, and here I am—what now?"

The situation was not as Latimer had planned it, for he saw the odds once more against him, but he resolved to put a bold face to the matter.

"I am here for satisfaction. You have robbed me, and it was to demand the return of my property I entered your lair."

"What is that to me?"

"A good deal!" the Virginian cried. "You must not think I am a child to be plundered with impunity. I demand my own!"

"Go on to our head-quarters and get what you want; I shall not hinder you. Go!"

"Where is your villainous den?"

The Vulture Queen laughed aloud.

"That is for you to find—you and the valiant Texas Chick. Do you suppose I am fool enough to be your guide? Not so—my guileless Virginian. What you find in Thornpath Chaparral you must work for. My only advice in the case is, take care you don't find too much!"

"Woman, let us consider this matter seriously. I am your bitter foe; I make the assertion even in the face of your outlaws; and though I fail one day I shall move again the next, and keep on until I have brought you and your infamous gang to ruin!"

"Caramba! how bravely he talks!" exclaimed Tiger-Lily, with a mocking laugh which was echoed from the tree-tops until the chaparral seemed alive with men.

Latimer remained silent for a moment, uncertain how to proceed. He had hoped to find the Vultures' lair, enter silently, and recover his property. Instead, he was confronted by a foe altogether too large to be defied, and against whom an attack would probably result in his speedy death; and it looked as though he was baffled, at the least, while if Tiger-Lily let him go a second time as easily as she had at first, then she would belie the reputation people had given her.

He glanced keenly at the men in the tree-tops and then planted the breech of his rifle on the ground and looked steadily at the Vulture Queen.

"Madam," he said, "you hold the reins of power to-day, but, sometime I am going to visit you at your home."

"Take care you don't get there before you are ready!" she retorted. "We are dealing kindly with you, because you are so young and innocent, but so much loud talk may lead to unpleasant results. We are not angels."

"Rest assured, no one thinks you are!"

"On the contrary, we are people who may easily be driven to deserve the name our neighbors give us. Be careful, sir, and not let your too-ready tongue get you into trouble."

The Vulture Queen showed a trace of anger for the first time, but the hot-headed Virginian was not cowed, and he was about to make a retort when Zeb White pulled at his sleeve.

"Go slow, pard; go slow," he said warningly. "Them ez goes away will live ter come some other day."

"So you are there, my precious Texas Chick!" said Tiger-Lily, changing her attention. "What mischief are you plotting?"

"Most august queen, every feather on my carcass is eloquent with ther voice o' peace; you kin hear me peep," Zeb replied, with a profound bow.

"Bah! do you think you are blinding us, my fine fellow? So you came to Thornpath Chapar-

ral to aid this innocent youth from the East? So you are going on a still-hunt in his interests? Nonsense! All this may be believed by those outside the chaparral, and the Virginian is not expected to be discerning. But you can't deceive us, with your monkey airs and your prating about the Texas Chick. Bah! you are an owl masquerading as a hen, since you like the last name; but your true color shows through your borrowed plumage!"

CHAPTER VIII.

AN ITEM ON THE WRONG SIDE.

THE Texas Chick was visibly disconcerted by the last words, though why he should be Latimer could not understand. He put out his hands quickly.

"I peep!" he said, hastily. "Don't t'ar me all ter pieces. I pull down my feathers an' beg fur mercy."

"You shall have none," returned Tiger Lily, still swinging indolently in her natural hammock, but speaking with energy, "I will show the deluded man beside you, who sees no further than the dirt on your face, that all that is dirty is not honest. Take heed to your companion, Walter Latimer, for he may do you harm yet. Why is he spending his time around Thornpath Chaparral when he should be at work? Know you that he is an imposter; that he is no prairie-man, but a detective from Austin sent to ferret out a mystery. What mystery? Men say counterfeit money is being made in this part of Texas; though where, no man knows. This precious fraud, who sees fit to call himself a chicken, has settled the matter in his own mind. Lo! the Texas Vultures are villains; consequently they must be the counterfeiters. So reasons the Prairie-Hen, and so it must be!"

Tiger-Lily poured forth this long address with a buoyant recklessness, ending with her old, mocking laugh, and the chorus in the tree-tops took up the refrain, and a troop of chuckling demons seemed let loose.

But Latimer's gaze was on Zeb White.

Was Tiger Lily's charge true or false?

Whichever it was, Zeb looked surprised and honest.

"Darnation beetles!" he exclaimed; "what d'ye mean by sech rubbish? Me a detective? Me!"

"That'll do!" and the Vulture Queen waved her hand. "We won't waste any argument about it. I know whereof I speak, and I don't care whether you admit or deny it. But, my good Prairie-Hen, if you want to know more about the Texas Vultures, if you want to see the spurious money turned from the mold, come to our lair!"

At the last word the female outlaw put her hand to her month and blew a shrill note on a tin-whistle; then there was a momentary rustling of the tree-tops and the outlaws were gone, one and all—Tiger Lily and the men.

Latimer and his guide were alone, and for a moment the former was nearly ready to believe the Vultures had gone by supernatural means, and into the earth or air. Then he recovered his wits and made a rush to pursue them; but the same vines they had turned to their use, caught and flung him back.

The Texas Chick again drew his knife, and slashed away at the impediment, which proved to be partly artificial; but by the time he had cut through, there was neither sight nor sound from the Vultures.

The baffled hunters faced each other in chagrined silence.

"What shall we do?" Latimer finally asked.

"You may knock me in ther head," Zeb meekly replied. "I'm pulled off ther roost, an' my spurs are cut; I'm nowhar."

"This reminds me of the female outlaw's charge against you. What have you to say?"

"Nothin', while we stay byar; we don't know who's a-listenin'. Of one thing be sart'in, though; you kin bet on me while I hev a feather left. I'm none ther more dang'rous ef I be huntin' fur counterfeiters."

"Drop your illiterate style of speaking, at least."

"I shall when I drop my last feather, an' not afore. I'm no grammar-fed goslin', an' I don't hanker ter be."

The Chick spoke with unusual warmth, and Walter hastened to beg his pardon. Then they began a fresh advance. Neither the trail of the Vultures nor a path could be found, and the twain pushed on laboriously.

An hour passed.

Then, from behind a bank of clouds appeared the sun, and they were shown that they were moving east instead of west. Zeb ascended a tree, and found himself near the edge of the chaparral. They had moved in a half-circle and worked back to the section from which they started.

He descended and made his report, and then neither of the weary men thought of further effort that day. It was plain nothing could be done without a compass, and Walter was the first to suggest that the enterprise be abandoned for the time.

They were working their way out when they came upon a hut which stood in the midst of the bushes. It was of primitive style, built

entirely from the products of the wood; but Latimer looked with interest when told that it was the abiding-place of Jarl Belvin.

Zeb would have given it a wide berth, but his companion had not forgotten his resolution to call on the hermit, and they went to the door. The place was unoccupied and silent. They did not enter, for there was nothing of interest visible, and neither had a desire to anger Jarl.

Once beyond the chaparral, Walter turned to his companion.

"I want an explanation of the charge made by the Vulture Queen," he said, quietly. "She says you are sailing under false colors; that you are not a mere prairie-man; but that you are a detective, and in this section for a particular purpose. How is it?"

The Texas Chick chewed steadily at his tobacco for several seconds before he replied. Finally, he brought his gaze around to Latimer, and looked at him keenly.

"I reckon you're an honest man," he finally said.

"I hope I am, Zeb."

"An' one what'd keep a secret given ye in confidence, always pervidin' it warn't a guilty secret."

"To that I will readily say, yes."

"I thought so, an' seein' ez how we hev been throwed together ez pard, an' that durnation gal-tiger has raised her bugle, I'll confess she war part right. I am a-lookin' fur them counterfeiter; but when she says I'm a detective from Galveston, or from Austin, whichever she said, she is all at sea. I'm no detective. I'm jest ez you see me now—plain, rough, uneducated Zeb White, the Texas Chick. But, ye see, thar is counterfeitin' done in this part o' Texas; men hev even been sent from the East ter look 'em up. When this come ter my notice, sez I, ter myself, 'Zeb, hyar's a chance fur you ter win money an' glory.' An' I come hyar fur ter still-hunt 'em down."

The explanation was made in such a way that Latimer did not think of doubting a word.

"Well, have you succeeded?"

"I ain't no nearer than I war when I begun," Zeb acknowledged, with a look of disgust.

"But have you no theory?"

"From the fu'st I hev had my eye on the Vultures, an' I hev never wavered in my jee. But, still-hunt or loud hunt, I reckon it'll take ev'ry feather I own ter prove what I b'lieve."

"Do you really think they are the counterfeiter?"

"I ain't got a doubt on't."

"Then give me your hand and let us swear eternal war against them. With me it is a personal matter, but we will work to the same end and never be content until this female outlaw and her gang are behind the bars."

They clasped hands and the compact was formed, for weal or woe, though neither of them suspected what would come of it. Latimer under-rated the Texas Vultures. Twice had he been in their hands and been comparatively lightly dealt with, and he made the error of judging them by his own experience rather than by the tales Abbott Woodbank had told of their lawless deeds.

Yet, Woodbank had said he would never feel safe at night were not his rancheros near at hand and more numerous than the chaparral robbers.

Before the allies parted the Texas Chick had gained a promise that Latimer would not mention their league, or anything about the counterfeiting, to any one, not even Woodbank. He gave no stable reason for the request, except that he wished to "still-hunt" them, but the Virginian readily promised.

Then, as noon was near at hand, they said good-day and separated, Walter going at once to his stopping-place.

It is not our purpose to dwell on his every-day life, except when it bears directly on our story. Many incidents of importance to him would be of little interest to the reader. How he rode and hunted with Randal, talked on serious matters with the elder Woodbank and spent happy hours with Constance, the reader can imagine as well as to read.

Two days passed quickly and pleasantly. Latimer enjoyed the new life in the fullest degree. The long gallops on the prairie were particularly interesting, as well as the minutiae of life on a Texas ranch.

And Constance?

Well, man's life, if not history, repeats itself in many ways and Latimer was treading an old road. Miss Woodbank was beautiful, refined and charming. True, there were flaws in her character. Who is without them? She was an only daughter, and as such she had been petted too far for her own good. Latimer saw it frequently, but to him her few faults were but flaws in an almost perfect diamond.

During the days, too, he saw more of Moza, the singularly intelligent half-breed girl, and Pedro Lopez, the cut-throat overseer. The latter seemed to have swallowed his wrath and always met Latimer with a respectful salute, though no words were wasted between them.

On the second evening the Virginian retired early. He had been out on a long ride with Randal and felt too tired to remain up any

great length of time. So he went to his bed and was soon asleep.

When he awoke the house was silent and, evidently, all had retired for the night. He wondered what time it was, but as the Vulture Queen had his watch he had no means of knowing without leaving the room. Remembering his loss caused him to fall into bitter thought, and he finally became so wide-awake and restless that he resolved to dress and go out on the piazza, there to smoke a cigar in solitude and peace.

He carried out the first part of the plan, at least, and, with his chair tipped back and his feet on the guard-rail, settled down to the companionship of his thoughts and his cigar.

He was still sitting there and looking into the darkness, which was unbroken by moon or stars, when the phenomenon of a portion of the darkness *seeming to move*, caused him to look closer and discover, a human figure approaching the house.

There were enough ways to explain this fact, but the late hour and some other things caused the Virginian to look with increasing interest.

CHAPTER IX.

NOCTURNAL WANDERERS.

THE unknown came slowly toward the house and, it seemed to Latimer, in a stealthy and secret way. Not being of a romantic turn of mind he tried to laugh at this idea, but the hour was in favor of it and he succeeded but poorly.

The more he looked the more he became convinced that the unknown had a secret and unlawful purpose; and then, if not before, he remembered Abbott Woodbank's assertion that the Texas Vultures were liable to descend on the house at any time.

As the course of the unknown was directly toward his corner of the piazza, Latimer had a good chance of settling the question.

He removed his cigar and, keeping his hand near the shadow of a pillar, with the leaves of creeping vines to further concealment, he looked keenly down.

The unknown was a man; he saw that as he came closer to the house; and he was struck by his general resemblance to Jarl Belvin. True, his face was indistinguishable, but the form was the same.

Jarl Belvin at Woodbank house!

Latimer remembered the statement of old trouble between him and the ranch owner, a trouble he had never heard fully explained, and dark forebodings were in the young man's mind when he heard a voice just below him:

"All is well!"

It was a woman's voice, but the words were spoken softly and cautiously, it seemed, and Walter was more perplexed than reassured. He bent forward as much as possible and looked down.

The piazza, properly speaking, was a double one, and Walter sat on the part connecting with the second floor of the house. On the lower floor of the piazza he saw the speaker, a woman, as he had supposed.

In the darkness he was not sure of her identity, but she spoke again and the last doubt vanished.

"Come back in the shadow!"

It was Moza, the half-blood, who spoke, and at the last word she retreated from view and the man caught at a column and drew himself up to the piazza, though the steps were near at hand.

The position showed his form to better advantage, and Walter would almost have sworn it was Jarl Belvin! And this man who came secretly to the house after midnight, and was received by Constance's maid—why was he there?

Not as a lover, surely, for he was more than twice Moza's age and not a man for love or tenderness. Nor would Moza, with other lovers in abundance, be likely to settle on one of his years.

Why, then, was he there?

Latimer remembered his asserted hatred for the master of the Woodbank, and drew his own conclusions. But what of Moza? Was it possible she was leagued with so desperate a man, and for an evil purpose?

The Virginian was reluctant to believe it, for he had thought well of the half-blood girl, but circumstances were against her; secret midnight meetings are seldom without some element which amounts to an evil, if not to a crime.

Convinced that it would not be wrong to spy upon the pair, Walter went cautiously across the floor, his slippered feet making little or no noise, until the head of the stairs was reached. There, a dozen or fifteen steps led to the lower floor, the sides guarded by a hand-rail.

It was not easy to get a view without betraying his presence, but as he heard nothing further, he ventured down a step at a time until convinced that the nocturnal wanderers were not on the lower piazza.

Considerably surprised, he then descended and looked for them in vain. The piazza had no occupant except himself, and, when he tried the windows, they were fast.

The mystery increased, but just as he was trying to decide what to do next, a sound arose at one side and close to the nearest cabin of the rancheros' quarters. Beyond a doubt it was the clash of steel, as though a knife had accidentally been struck against a rifle-barrel, and Latimer had no doubt but Moza and her visitor had gone there.

Should he follow?

One moment he hesitated. It was not his nature to pry into other people's affairs, but if Moza was receiving Jarl Belvin, a sworn enemy of the Woodbanks, in such a way, it ought not to be passed lightly over by him. Such a course would be criminal.

Acting on this belief the Virginian stepped from the piazza and went more boldly toward the cabin than was wise, considering he had taken no weapon, though a secret advance was practically out of the question.

As he neared the building voices reached his ear and he passed around quickly, resolved to catch the prowlers in the midst of their conference; but as he turned the first corner something in the form of a man struck him with such force that he was dashed to the ground.

Then, before he could make a move to arise, one man was seated astride his body, while a second pricked his neck with a knife.

"Easy, senor," said the latter; "we are gentle as lambs in our way, but when you get us angry we never hesitate to cut a throat!"

"Who are you?" demanded Latimer, more angry than frightened, and speaking directly to the point.

There was a possibility the men might be Woodbank's employees, who had mistaken him for some one else. But his hope was speedily dashed to the ground.

"No friends of yours, Senor Latimer, but men who would cut your throat anyhow, were it not against orders."

"Whose orders?"

"Caramba! don't you wish you knew! Never mind; you are likely to find out before you are through. Jose, didn't he come to our net like a lamb when we called?"

The men chuckled together and Walter perceived that the clanking of steel had been but an artifice to decoy him away. At whose command? He remembered Moza and Jarl Belvin and looked about for the hermit, but he was not visible. There was a doubt if he had been there at all, but Latimer held grimly to his previous opinion.

What scheme was afoot? Surely all this preliminary work was not necessary if it was aimed against him, nor did he believe Moza was base enough to help injure one who had lately done her an important favor. No; more likely the plot was against Woodbank, and the marauders having seen that he was in the way, had decoyed him to the cabin.

In the way of whom—of what?

The question suggested a fresh theory of violence, and it became torture for the young man to lie there inactive. All his courage and resolution arose and he determined to make a movement for life and liberty, desperate though the chance was.

The knife had been removed from his throat and his captors began to chatter like old women, and then, if ever, was his time for action. He moved, and in a decidedly novel way.

One man was astride his body as he lay prostrate, and the other back of his head, but they were facing each other and near enough for Latimer's purpose.

Suddenly he reached back and seized the man behind him, who had no thought of such a thing, and by a quick jerk forward he not only destroyed the fellow's equilibrium, but drove his head full into number two's stomach, knocking him over like a nine-pin.

And then, as the two went to grass together, Latimer sprang to his feet and ran rapidly toward the house. He expected some loose lead to come flying after him, but nothing of the kind occurred, nor did he hear another sound from the pair. He was sure not a movement was made in pursuit.

He nearly forgot them, however, as, glancing at the upper part of the house, he saw a light shining dimly in the room where Abbott Woodbank slept. It at once suggested a fresh suspicion to him; if Jarl Belvin was in the vicinity, as he believed, this light might mean imminent danger to the master of the house.

The Virginian darted up the steps. There was no longer need of caution, for even his slippers had been lost and his stockinged feet made no sound, and he hastened along to Woodbank's window.

There he found his suspicions confirmed; the curtain was down, but the window was open.

He swept the curtain aside and an extraordinary scene was presented to his view. Woodbank was in his bed and his position was a natural one, but the odor of chloroform showed why he slept so soundly when he had neighbors who would otherwise have run great risk of detection.

One of the two was a man who was working at the lock of a backwoods safe—a stout chest—and a regular clicking was made as his instrument slipped in the lock.

Number two of the marauders held a dark-lantern for his work, and this person was—Tiger-Lily, the Vulture Queen!

Latimer stood dumfounded, for it had not occurred to him to associate the girl-outlaw with the nocturnal operations, and, somehow, it seemed wonderfully bold for her to venture where an alarm would bring a score of ranchmen from their cabins to cut off her retreat.

His amazement was fatal to his chance for secrecy, for the lock-picker suddenly turned his head and saw him. Alarm flashed over the fellow's face and an oath fell from his lips; then with a single motion he caught the dark-lantern and flung it into a corner.

The Virginian drew back a pace to shut off escape by the window, but as he did so a heavy object struck him; an object unquestionably the person of the lock-picker; and he was flung back until, his heels striking an impediment, he was dashed prostrate to the piazza floor.

He was up in a moment, but in that moment the robber had made good his escape, going at headlong speed without a care, whether he gave a thought or not, for his female accomplice.

And thus it was that, as she, too, sprung out of the window, she ran directly into the arms of Walter Latimer. This time he was prepared for a shock, and he caught her in a hold her desperate struggles failed to break.

CHAPTER X.

LATIMER WINS A POINT.

It did not take the Vulture Queen long to discover that her strength was not equal to Latimer's and she ceased struggling and stood passively in his grasp.

A moment's pause ensued, unbroken by any sound not natural to the night. Latimer realized that the household had not been aroused, nor were any of the girl-outlaw's friends at hand, and a savage triumph filled him as he saw that he had at last captured the woman who had humiliated him and that she was utterly in his power.

Silently he led her a few paces away, to where he could better watch for her allies, and at the same time, where their voices would not be audible to Woodbank, should the fresh air free him from the chloroform's hold.

"We have met again, Queen Tiger-Lily," he said, his voice full of triumph.

"Yes," she answered simply, but in a clear voice.

"The tables are now turned," he continued, "and you are my prisoner."

"Yes," she again said.

"It is a long road that has no turning. You have met me with your outlaws, robbed me and scoffed when I was in your power. You are now in mine!"

"Yes."

"Have you nothing to say—no appeals to make for mercy?"

"I have not yet learned your purpose."

"It is easily told. I shall hand you over to the proper authorities and say, 'Here is a female outlaw; a leader of counterfeiters, house-breakers, horse thieves, and rascals in general. This is the notorious Tiger-Lily!'"

"You will do all this?"

"Yes."

"Remember I am a woman."

"Had you remembered that yourself, you would not be here to-night, nor would you be in peril of the law."

"Mr. Latimer," she said gravely, yet without a tremor in her musical voice, "you are a man of the world and should know people are not always to be judged by their condition. Misfortune makes as many outcasts as does natural depravity. When you see a woman buffeted by the crushing wheels of adversity, did it ever occur to you that she had a reason for all this not to be found by a casual glance?"

In spite of himself, the voice moved the Virginian. His chivalrous nature had made him a respectful admirer of the sex to which the world owes its refinement, and though he had felt harshly toward the Vulture Queen, it seemed like the voice of her sex rather than of Tiger-Lily that spoke; but fast after this wavering came the conviction that a designing woman was trying to blind and soften him for her own good.

"Misfortune may make an outcast, but it cannot make a criminal," he answered. "One wrong cannot right another. I have found you at the head of outlaws, desperate men who are the scourge of this region, and I must judge you as I find you."

"And you adhere to your determination to hold me a prisoner?"

"I do."

"Think again, Mr. Latimer," she said, with increasing earnestness. "I have met you twice before, and twice you have been in my power. Once, you were on your way to my home with hostile intent, as you confessed. One word from me would have sealed your fate; one word from me would have brought to your heart rifles which never miss. Was the word given? Was any serious indignity offered you?"

"I was robbed," he muttered; but the fact seemed to grow small in that moment.

"That I will admit, but no bodily harm was offered."

"Rat assured, I shall not harm you. I seek only to do my duty as a law-abiding citizen."

"If you knew all, you would not threaten me with the law."

"That is the cry of every law-breaker," he said, with impatience. "When success is theirs, they boast of their evil deeds; when the law's strong grasp closes upon them, lo! there is a drama, a tragedy, in their past. If the world but knew, they are angels! You are like all the rest!"

He felt her tremble, or shiver, in his grasp. Some strong emotion plainly moved her, and when he tried his best to think it fear, her steady voice belied the supposition. He was trying hard to be severe, and outwardly he was all of that; but he was not so calm and cold as he seemed. His arm was about the waist of one of the loveliest women he had ever seen, and though he hated himself for the thought, he could not but imagine how the scene would be changed, if, with the silent night around them and the soft prairie air fanning their cheeks, this woman's character were as spotless as her face was beautiful.

She was one to admire and respect, to love, fight for, die for, if necessary, had she but the honor he could no, help wishing she had.

But she was a queen of outlaws!

She did not answer at once, and when she did the even voice was changed to a tremor.

"Heaven help me if all men judge thus!"

"How can they judge otherwise?"

"Perhaps some of them, who have trod weary roads themselves, would not be so pitiless."

The Virginian looked blankly into the night. Tiger-Lily had turned the tables upon him; she was making him believe that, instead of working for the right, he was acting the part of a persecutor; for he *did* begin to feel that way, even while all his common-sense told him he was acting against reason.

He fell back on another point.

"And what of to-night's work? I find you in the chamber of my uncle, where, after chloroforming him, you are attempting to rob a locked chest. What excuse have you for that?"

"You do not know all; you do not know that Abbott Woodbank is my bitterest enemy. You cannot imagine how I have been driven on and down by him. And if I went there to-night it was not to take his money, nor to enrich myself in any way, but to gain my rights. You do not understand all this, nor can I explain, but we have done no harm to Mr. Woodbank."

"You malign an honorable man. If Abbott Woodbank is your enemy, it is because you have made him so."

"Pitiless!" she murmured, in an unsteady voice.

"I am not pitiless. I pity you more than you know, and I deeply regret that your splendid talents should have been so misused and perverted."

"*Madre de Dios!* you do not know!"

The voice, with its inflection of keen sorrow, touched him more than an appeal would have done. His resolution wavered. They stood alone with the dead silence of night around them. There was no one to know if he wavered and proved faithless to the demands of his stern judgment; and it would certainly be better to abate a jot of righteous rigor and give a repentant woman a chance to reform—especially a young and beautiful woman.

For, as a faithful historian, we are compelled to admit that the spell of beauty was over the Virginian.

"Suppose," he finally said, "that I forego my purpose, that I grant you mercy, what will be the result when you meet me again with your Vultures at your back and I stand unsupported?"

"I dare not say we will meet as friends," she replied, quickly, "for there is a wide gulf between us, in our worldly positions; but I can assure you it will not be as enemies. I have been harsh and severe in the past, but that was because you were Abbott Woodbank's relative; I knew the latter fact before you first told me, and that was why you were stopped on the road; but if you spare me to-night, the Texas Vultures are no longer your enemies. Outlaw that I am, I always keep my word."

"And my property that you now hold?"

"Every dollar shall be refunded."

"I care nothing for the money—"

"The watch, too. It has never been in other hands than mine. Indifferent though I seemed, your account of its history touched me, and I have preserved it faithfully. It shall be returned as I received it—in the same condition, I mean."

"How will you return it?"

"I know of but one way—"

"You will bring it to me?"

"No, no; not that!" she exclaimed, quickly. "Not that. But I will send one of my men who shall deliver it to you at an appointed time and place."

"I would rather receive it from you."

"It is impossible; but you shall have the watch and the money; I swear it."

"When?"

She meditated for a moment.

"To-morrow evening, at any point you select, providing it be not near this house. I need not ask you to deal fairly with my messenger."

"I see; it would be easy for me to lay a trap and secure him as well as the money. I will not do it. No one shall know of the incident, and the man shall return freely. Very well, Tiger-Lily, I accept the terms. You are free!"

He released her, but she made no haste to depart. Instead, she stood motionless and silent for a moment. Then she spoke in an unsteady voice:

"Mr. Latimer, the gratitude of one in my position may be a libel on gratitude's name, but I will show you I can, at least, keep the promises I make. You shall have your property to-morrow evening. One of my men shall bring everything to—where do you say?"

A place was settled upon, and then the Vulture Queen continued:

"I want to show you I am not so bad as you think. All the time we have been talking a dagger has been within my reach, in its sheath at my belt. With one movement, I could have drawn it and stabbed you fatally. Learn from this that Tiger-Lily is not all bad, for I would have suffered captivity rather than strike you. See the weapon!"

She held a small, but keen-edged dagger for a moment to his view, and then replaced it at her belt.

"It is in your power to reconsider what you have promised, but the knife shall not be used against you," she added.

"No; I will not reconsider. It shall be as I have said; you shall go free. And I see, too, that when I thought I had all as I willed it, you really held the reins of power. Queen Lily, I have wronged you in my judgment, as I freely admit!"

He spoke warmly, and a sad smile crossed her lovely face.

"If I had been wronged no more than that I would not complain, and you have atoned for any injustice of yours. And, in return, I thank you for your generosity to an unfortunate woman. My thanks may be worse than a mockery, but, surely fate will not fail to reward you for your kindness to one who knows so little of such things. I hope you will be blessed as you deserve."

"It is reward enough for me to have the gratitude of a deserving woman," he replied, meaning at that moment all he said. "If fate has dealt harshly with you, I trust it will be different in the future. But, you are far from your home and alone. Your men have deserted you—"

"Like cowards!" she interrupted, bitterly.

"The way to Thornpath Chaparral is long and lonely. Danger may lurk by the way; some of Woodbank's rancheros may be astir and seize you. Let me walk with you."

"No, no!" she said, quickly. "I can care for myself, and some of my own men may be loitering by the way. Your offer is a kind one, but I must decline. I would not have the Vultures know of this."

"But when are we to meet again?"

"Perhaps, never."

"Never?—when our acquaintance has been thus cemented."

"You are kind and generous, but I must still say no. It may be we shall meet soon—who can tell—but do not ask a promise. I am uncertain and confused. Let me go!"

She turned away and the Virginian felt a regret which seemed a weakness. He, an honorable man, was sorry to part from a female outlaw, a woman whose name was cursed in Texas!

CHAPTER XI.

THE BREATH OF SUSPICION.

TIGER-LILY moved toward the steps which led down from the piazza, but her progress was slow and Latimer kept by her side. Silence was between them for a while. He would have given much for permission to see her safely to the edge of the chaparral, for if she encountered any of Woodbank's rancheros his clemency would have been shown in vain, but her way of refusing permission before had shown him the uselessness of argument.

At the top of the stairway she paused.

"Here we part!" she said, in a low voice.

"As friends?"

"Remember who I am!"

"I remember what you might be," he could not help saying, "and in any case you are a woman. Do we part as friends?"

"If you wish," she replied, "for I can have no other feeling. You have been my friend, indeed, and for that I thank you. I shall never forget. Good by!"

She spoke the last word abruptly and turned away, but he spoke again.

"One moment!"

She paused and looked back.

His hand was extended toward her.

One moment she hesitated, and then her own hand was placed in his, rested there for a moment and was withdrawn. Once more she turned away, went quickly but silently down the steps and out into the night. One moment

longer Walter saw her, as she hastened away, and then the darkness hid her from view.

Tiger-Lily was gone.

For several minutes Walter Latimer stood motionless, looking toward the point where she disappeared. With the fascination of her presence gone, he had a chance to think more calmly, and he surely had food for ample thought. He had made a decision in a most important case; the step was taken for weal or woe, and nothing now remained but to go over it again and again in thought.

Who could help making the review.

Had he done wisely? When he asked the question the magnitude of the night's adventure came to him with full force. He had found robbers in his uncle's room, and one of them was a notorious leader of outlaws and a person who had once robbed him. Yet, putting all these facts behind him, he had listened when she talked softly to him, and spoke vaguely of her troubles, and, listening, he had yielded and allowed her to go free.

Had he done wisely? His gentler nature answered affirmatively. He had been merciful to a woman; he had given her a chance to repent. But would she repent? Stern common-sense said, No. He who falls once from grace may regret it, but only those who are wedded to their vices would put themselves at the head of an organized band of outlaws. Thinking thus, Latimer was filled with dismay, and he was almost tempted to pursue the Vulture Queen and bring her to the house a captive.

Man-like, too, he was assailed by his pride, which repeated again and again that he had been hoodwinked and deceived; and nothing can mortify one of his sex more than to know they have been over-reached by an unscrupulous, depraved woman.

Fear for his uncle's safety finally became his uppermost idea, but when he went to the window he found it closed, and, through a corner left upon by the curtain, saw Woodbank serenely smoking. Was it possible he did not know he had been under the influence of a somnific drug?

As Latimer's course had made a statement to his uncle out of the question, he retraced his steps and was about to enter the house when he remembered the slippers he had lost by the cabin when set upon by the two men.

It would not do to leave them until morning, so he secured his revolver and went to regain them.

His old assailants had vanished, and he found the missing articles without trouble. He was about to return when a cough sounded near at hand and he looked up quickly.

Pedro Lopez stood before him.

"Good-evening, senor," said the overseer, politely.

Latimer returned the salutation curtly, and would have passed on without further words, but Pedro spoke again:

"You walk late, Senor Latimer."

"If you were in bed you would not know it."

"True, but as I am not in bed, I do know it," said the Mexican, with a disagreeable smile.

"Well, what of it?"

"I was merely wondering why you kept your slippers in so odd a place."

"I suppose I have a right to keep them on my heels, my head, or in high air, haven't I?" Latimer sharply demanded.

"*Caramba!* why not? But the ways of *Americanos* puzzles a humble man like me. I cannot see why you put your slippers here, and come for them at so late an hour. I suppose there is a reason, for, as we say in Mexico, '*Un cabello haze sombra*,' and this matter is not such a trifle as a hair."

Latimer faced the fellow squarely. What did he know? What did he suspect? The meeting was a most unlucky one, for it was foolish to hope Pedro would remain silent when he could hurt the man he hated by speaking, and Walter could have taken him by the throat with ready zeal.

As he dared not choke him, and could not secure his good will, he resolved to brave it out to the end.

"See here, my fine fellow," he said, sharply, "if you are guardian of my slippers, produce your papers of authority. I may have made you my valet and forgotten the fact. But if you can't maintain your claim, be so good as to mind your own business."

"Senor, why are you angry?"

The voice was pitched meekly and low, but Latimer detected the lurking devil in it.

"For one thing, because your carcass is before my eyes. I would rather see a grave-stone, any day. Let us understand each other, Pedro Lopez. You hate me. This state of affairs began when you lay under Jarl Belvin's heel, and I went against you. You come of a race that never forgets. You will always hate me. Just now you are acting the cringing hypocrite, but you cannot deceive me. The wolf is visible through the sheep-skin. Now, from this day, let us be strangers. When we meet, look you at your own nose, not at mine. Good-night!"

At the last word, the Virginian wheeled, and strode toward the house. Pedro did not follow to call after him. He reached his chamber

without further encounter, but in anything but an amiable mood. To the events of the night, unsatisfactory as they had been before, was added the trouble likely to follow his meeting with Lopez.

If, by any means, the visit of the Vultures was discovered, the Mexican would not fail to connect the two circumstances, and tell his story to Woodbank.

That something unpleasant would then occur went without the saying.

It was long before the young man slept, for his mind was in a whirl. He certainly had ample food for thought. His thoughts dwelt mostly on Tiger-Lily, but he did not forget that Moza had received some one at the house. He had abandoned the idea that this person had been Jarl Belvin, but he believed him to have been one of the Vultures. The coincidence of time in the coming of the two parties connected them reasonably, though not surely.

Granting this to be true, Moza stood revealed as an ally of the chaparral outlaws. This was a surprise for Latimer, for he had thought well of her, but since it was so, he resolved to see her at an early hour in the morning.

After a brief sleep the Virginian arose, plunged his face in water zealously, to erase all signs of his strangely-spent night and joined the family at the table.

All were there as usual, all greeted him the same as before, and not a shadow was on any of their faces.

The danger was not over, however; Woodbank had yet to meet his overseer.

They were having an after-breakfast chat when one of the colored chambermaids entered the room holding a dark-lantern well advanced.

Latimer's hair seemed to arise on his head, a recollection of the lantern hastily tossed aside by the companion of Tiger-Lily came to him and he did not doubt but this was the same one. He had entirely forgotten the circumstance until then.

"I found dis in your chamber, sah," said the girl.

"You did?" said Woodbank, in surprise. "That is very odd. A dark-lantern! We have never had one on the premises since we came to Texas. Now, then, how did this get into my room?"

He held it up in his hand and looked at it wonderingly. Latimer had nothing to say. Just then the vines at the wide window stirred and, looking toward that point, the Virginian saw the darkly-smiling face of Pedro Lopez.

Seeing he was discovered, the Mexican stepped boldly into the room.

"In my country," he said, addressing Woodbank, but looking at Latimer, "we should say such a thing was a trace of a burglar's attempted work. Dark-lanterns are the favorite light of such men. Let us investigate, and we may yet discover the burglar!"

And, still looking at Latimer, he showed his white teeth in a most villainous smile.

CHAPTER XII.

FRESH DIFFICULTIES BESET LATIMER.

THIS bit of by-play was not observed by Woodbank, but Walter Latimer understood the Mexican very well. The clew he feared had really fallen into the fellow's hands and he had drawn his inference at once. The inference, only, was his thus far, and Walter hoped he would learn nothing definite.

He resolved to play boldly, regardless of the cards his opponent might possibly hold, and trust to luck to win.

"Your theory is undoubtedly correct, Pedro," said Woodbank, quickly. "I will go to my chamber at once and see if anything is missing. Remain here, both of you, until I return."

He went out with evident excitement, and when the girl followed, Latimer and Pedro had the room to themselves.

"*Un cabello haze sombra*," said the latter, with his annoying smile.

"Speak English, or not at all," said Walter, tartly.

"I say, the least hair makes a shadow. 'Tis an old saying in my land. And if a hair casts a shadow, what of a pair of slippers?"

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that I am not blind. Senor Latimer was abroad at a late hour last night. He refused to explain. Now, we know that burglars last night entered Senor Woodbank's chamber."

"Pedro Lopez, you are as full of mysterious ways as you are of villainy, but if I catch your meaning you insinuate that I was the burglar. Am I right?"

"*Caramba!* I did not say it. What gives the gentleman from the East that idea? It cannot be, as you Americans say, that the shoe fits."

Latimer did not answer. He arose, went to the table and picked up a book. For the next five minutes he pretended to be examining it, but, really, he was so full of rage that he could barely maintain his calmness. Pedro watched him, twisting his long mustache, and smiling in the old way.

Woodbank then returned hastily.

"It is so!" he said. "Some one has been in my room and tried to force open my chest; and

I now remember an odor in my room, when I awoke last night, which was like chloroform."

"Have you lost anything?" Latimer asked coolly.

"No. The chest resisted their efforts."

"In that you are lucky. Who can the burglar have been?"

"That is what I want to know."

"Senor Lopez, your overseer, has just insinuated that I am the man. I have waited for your return, and I now say plainly to Senor Lopez, that unless he retracts what he has said I will strangle him!"

The Virginian spoke calmly, but a deep undertone told that he was in dead earnest.

"*Madre de Dios!* I have made no charges—" Pedro began, but Walter interrupted him.

"No, you contemptible cur, you make insinuations, which are as devious and serpent-like as yourself, but they amount to the same thing. It does not change my position. Apologize, or, by my life, I'll whip you like the dog you are!"

He had taken Pedro's arm in a grasp which bade fair to leave its marks for more than one day, but a fierce gleam suddenly shot into the fellow's evil eyes, and he struck at Walter's face.

With a quick, upward stroke the Virginian passed the blow over his shoulder, and then Senor Lopez was caught in a cunning wrestling-lock and flung to the floor with a force which made the chairs dance.

He was up again in a moment, and a murderous-looking knife flashed in the air, but Woodbank stepped between them, a look of utter consternation on his face.

"Hold! hold! What does this mean?" he demanded.

"Out of my way!" hissed the overseer. "I will kill him for that. No man can wrong Pedro Lopez and live!"

But Woodbank kept his place resolutely, and Walter sat down in a chair with a careless smile on his face. He had laid Lopez on his back and was satisfied unless the fellow was resolved to get worse injured. Brief as the encounter had been, Latimer believed himself the better man of the two, so far as personal prowess went.

Woodbank spoke earnestly in a low tone and Pedro first grew calm and then thrust his knife back out of sight, but he looked at his enemy in a tigerish way.

"I am ashamed to be a witness of such a scene in my own house," said the elder man, looking at Walter; "but I might as well talk to the wind as to you two. Further than this, I hoped for the aid of both to solve this mystery, but you have added embarrassment to embarrassment. It is inconsiderate, to say the least."

Walter then apologized to his uncle and then gave an account of his nocturnal meeting with Lopez, telling only what he was willing to have known. He said that when out for a stroll he had lost one of his slippers and, going back for it, found the Mexican also. He made the story as simple as possible, and though Lopez shrugged his shoulders he made no comment.

Woodbank passed lightly over the affair and, evidently regarding it as trivial, returned to the attempted burglary. He said it was possible the hand of the Texas Vultures had been in the work, but he was more inclined to lay the blame at the door of some of his own employees.

Investigation might settle the matter, but, in any case, no harm had been done.

Lopez left the house and seemed to go about his work, and matters settled into the usual channel except that all were talking of the robbery.

Latimer was far from being at ease. When he so chivalrously spared the Vulture Queen the night before, he had been under the spell of her beauty and the romantic circumstances of the case.

With day and the lack of her presence, all was changed. The attempted robbery began to show like an ordinary case of the kind—grim, dark and ugly. He had turned his back on the facts, then, and allowed his chloroformed uncle to take his chance with life and death while he talked with the girl-outlaw, and then let her go free.

He now began to view the case disinterestedly and its coloring was wonderfully at variance with its former romantic light. It was well for Tiger-Lily she was not then subject to his verdict.

He began to look on her promise to give back his watch with doubt, too, and the chances of getting it seemed very small.

The night, however, would settle the whole question; he would keep the appointment made, and according as she did, or did not, fulfill her promise, she should be judged.

He became strangely restless for him, too, and the hours seemed to drag miserably.

The half-breed girl, Moza, was a good deal of the time under his notice and he watched her closely and curiously. She had never been calmer. She moved serenely about her duties, or talked in a proper spirit about the robbery, but not a word or look indicated that she had had a share in the work.

Yet, he resolved to question her and, watching his chance, stopped her on the piazza.

"The robbery was a strange affair, Moza," he pleasantly said.

"It was, indeed, senior," she said, promptly, but with her usual respectful manner.

"How do you account for it?"

"Ah! I should make a poor detective, senior. When I try to grasp a theory, my head turns like a top."

"Did you hear anything unusual last night?"

"Nothing, senior."

She looked into his face with a calm innocence which staggered him. Not a muscle betrayed uneasiness; not a waver of her eyes showed guilt. Yet, he would not abandon the attempt.

"I had a curious dream last night," he said, smilingly. "Of course I would not make it public, but you will be interested. I dreamed I came out on the piazza to smoke, and while thus engaged saw some one approaching the house. He came straight on and proved to be a stout, middle-aged man. I watched him, sitting by yonder post, half-covered by the vines. This is a dream you know."

He broke off suddenly, still watching her, but she smiled, nodded and evenly replied:

"Yes, senior."

"When he had nearly reached the piazza a woman's voice sounded just below me and I heard the words, 'All is well!' I looked down and saw—you, Moza!"

He made the announcement dramatically, but not a ripple disturbed her placid face.

"How odd, senior!"

"Very," he said, trying to speak dryly. "Well, the man came nearer, and then you spoke again, saying: 'Come back in the shadow!' The man climbed to the piazza, instead of using the steps, and then you and he went further back, together, and disappeared from my view. Then I awoke."

Moza laughed lightly.

"How romantic, senior!"

"A singular dream, wasn't it?"

"Very. Luckily, it was but a dream. Had it really been so, one might now think I had a part in the robbery."

"Was the dream really unfounded, Moza?" he demanded, dropping his light manner and regarding her sternly. "Can you honestly say nothing of the kind occurred?"

The girl looked surprised.

"Certainly, I can, senior. I was not out of my room at all last night."

"And you did not meet any man on the piazza?"

"I surely did not, senior!"

Latimer was in a mood to press matters and compel her to tell the truth, but her innocent manner staggered him. Was it possible a young girl, who had had a share in a crime, could stand there and lie to him as deliberately, calmly and innocently as that?

No; it seemed more likely he had, indeed, dreamed all the events of the previous night.

Such was his decision at that moment, and baffled and perplexed, he laughed and told her he was but joking. She went away with the old, respectful manner she had worn since he protected her from Pedro Lopez, and he was left to torture himself anew.

It was a momentary relief, when he saw the Prairie Chick lounging around the ranchero's quarters and looking toward the house, and he went promptly out to meet him.

Zeb was delighted to see him, and he made known the errand which had brought him there by one startling announcement.

"Pard, I've got down ter business, an' ef you'll ketch on, the Vultur' Queen is our prisoner in ther shake o' a deer's left leg!"

CHAPTER XIII.

"THE HONEST FLEA."

LATIMER recoiled. From Chick's manner it seemed that Tiger-Lily was near at hand, where one bold move on their part would secure her. And the announcement which, twenty-four hours before, would have filled him with delight, now struck dismay through and through him like an electric shock.

The events of the previous night had turned black to white and he was as anxious for the Vulture Queen to escape capture as he had before been to see her in the toils.

Until he knew whether she was going to keep her compact he would not lift a hand against her.

As for the dirty, uncouth Texas Chick, he was suddenly transformed into a ruffian of the darkest dye and Latimer felt like knocking him down.

"I see it pleases ye," said Zeb, with his blandest smile, "an' I reckon ye don't enjoy it any more than I do. Ther way we was used by that durned female critter bez rankled in my bosom ever sence. P'raps I don't hate her ez bad as you do, but my feelin's was hurt, an' I jist hanker ter gobble ther reward fur proof that they is ther counterfeiters."

By the time he was through Latimer had recovered an outward calmness.

"What is your new plan?" he asked.

"I hev been a idyit not ter see that ther way

ter get at them critters was by ther stream that flows from ther lake. 'Tain't a river, nur much o' a stream, anyhow, but it must be some sort o' a track. We kin start on ther south side o' ther chaparral an' work right inter ther heart o' ther place an' then hunt up ther critters."

"And is this all you have to say?"

"At present, vas."

"I thought by the way you raised your voice you had a sure thing."

"Wal it's a pint gained ter git inter ther durned hole without cuttin' down half ther woods, ain't it?"

"Of course."

"Wal, when shall we try it?"

Latimer ground his heel viciously into the ground.

"I'm not sure I shall do anything more about it, Zeb."

The Chick stared in blank amazement.

"You won't?"

"I hardly think I shall."

"Durnation beetles! why not?"

"I begin to believe I have been foolish to think of doing a work single-handed, as I may say, which all Texas has not been able to do. These outlaws are in a place hard of access, and they are ready to kill any one who does succeed in getting in. On the whole, it seems to me my wisest way is to drop them, once and for all."

Deep disappointment was pictured on Zeb's face, as well as surprise. He could not understand how a man leaped at one bound from the boiling pitch to a zero indifference, without some good cause.

"An' leave ther watch in ther hands o' ther enemy?"

"Better than than to get worse into the mire."

"Wal, you kin do ez you please, but I'll be skulped ef I peep while a Vultur' stands on two legs. They kin stroke my feathers right way o' ther grain, or wrong way, but I'll come up smilin' when time is called. I war a fool ter take a pardner, anyhow, 'specially one without spurs; an' from this time I still-hunt alone!"

And the Texas Chick shouldered his rifle and strode away in high indignation. Latimer waited a minute irresolutely, and then called after him; but it was too late; Zeb did not turn his head, and his long steps soon took him out of sight.

Night, again.

The prairie between Woodbank's house and Thornpath Chaparral was dark—almost silent and deserted. But, at one point, a man was astir and moving toward the west. This was Walter Latimer, on his way to keep the appointment when, if Tiger-Lily dealt uprightly with him, he was to receive back his watch and money.

He went with many doubts in his mind, and, it must be confessed, without much hope of seeing a messenger from the Vulture Queen. With the reputation she carried in Texas, it was not at all likely she would regard a promise as binding; she had swayed him for her own ends, and he was a dupe, that was all.

Thus spoke calm reason, but under all lurked a faint hope.

He reached the rendezvous and looked around. No second person was visible, and though Walter knew it was not time for any one to arrive, he began to feel a thrill of resentment.

Ten minutes passed, but just as he was working himself into a fury a man appeared in the gloom and strode forward. The Virginian looked at him keenly, and the scrutiny was returned in kind.

Then the slide of a dark-lantern was suddenly turned, and the light thrown on Latimer's face. The latter bore it coolly until the lantern was lowered.

"Zall right," said the new-comer. "You're zer man I come ter zee."

"Who did you come from?"

"Zer one who was ter give zer back zer watch."

"Very good; but, suppose you let me see your face, in turn."

"Certainly, zir. I am an honest man an' not afraid ter be zeen. Hyar I am, zir!"

He reversed the lantern and showed a small, wrinkled, dried-up face, as keen and crafty as that of a rat.

"I'm Zer Flea," he announced.

"The Flea?"

"Yes, zir; more commonly called Zer Honest Flea, fur I am honest all zer way through. Now, zir, ter business."

The outlaw closed the slide of his lantern, put the whole in his pocket and resumed:

"I have come from zer Queen ter give you, Mr. Latimer, a goold watch an' zertain moneys. It has been a long, hard tramp an' my legs are weary. Now, zir, if you could find it in your generous heart ter give me a few bits o' silver, it would take off zer weariness. An' I'm an honest man, zir; Zer Honest Flea, zey calls me."

Latimer was so delighted because Tiger-Lily had come out of the crucible like pure gold, that he could have given The Flea a hundred dollars willingly had he possessed it. As it was, he gave him what loose change was in his pockets and the man was duly grateful. The latter was an odd fellow, uniting to his

peculiar way of speaking a vast gravity of manner; but though common-sense told Latimer he did not deserve the money, he gave it freely because he had come from Tiger-Lily.

"Zank you, zir," said The Flea, soberly. "An' now ter business. Here is zer goold watch, an' here is zer moneys; all just as you loaned zem ter us. Zzet!"

Latimer acknowledged that he did, and with his hands once more on the watch he was too thoroughly pleased to criticise the use of the word "loan." The watch he put in its place on his vest and the money in his pocket.

"My work is about done, zir," said The Flea, taking him by the arm in a friendly way. "I shall go back to zer dismal chaparral an' ter my rough companions, but never zink, zir, zart I am wicked because I live zere. I am an honest man, zir; Zer Honest Flea, zey call me."

"You seem to be an excellent man, but—"

"I have my faults, but, zir, I am an honest man, an'—"

"Did your Queen—"

"An honest man, zir; I zay it again."

"Let up on it for awhile, for Heaven's sake. Did your Queen send any message?"

"Zounds! I am glad you spoke, zir." Ze did; ze zent a note. I had forgotten it, but it is hyar. I will hold zer lantern while you read, zir."

The nimble outlaw produced the light and a folded paper in quick succession and gave Latimer the promised chance to read.

It was not neglected, and the eager eyes of the young Virginian found, in a delicate, beautiful hand, these words:

"Do not say I have been ungrateful, or have failed to keep my word. I return your property and am only sorry I cannot more fitly reward you for your generosity to one who is more the victim of fate than a vicious nature. May fate deal with you as you have dealt with me."

The note lacked a signature, but it so breathed the Vulture Queen's sentiments that Latimer felt the old fascination stealing over him. He felt touched and forgiving, and would have sent a message had The Flea been a more romantic agent.

As it was, he determined to see Tiger-Lily again before many days had elapsed. Once more he thanked The Flea for his trouble, much to that honest man's gratification.

"If zo be we never meet again," said he, "I hope you will not forget a man who is not zough black as he is painted. Zer choicest goods are in zer smallest parzels."

Latimer was tempted to try and secure him for a guide to the outlaw home, but as this would not be in keeping with the friendly policy adopted by Tiger-Lily, he put temptation behind him.

The Flea said farewell in a becoming way and then, turning, strode away in the darkness.

Walter remained under the tree, his thoughts busily working. As matters had gone he was not sorry he had shown mercy to the Vulture Queen. She had proved that, though she had faults, she possessed honor enough to keep her word—no small matter in this dubious world of ours.

For ten minutes Latimer did not think of stirring from the spot, but, then, he wheeled and started for the house. As he did so he thought of his watch and dropped his hand to his vest.

The result brought him to a halt, while consternation and rage appeared on his face.

The watch was not there!

Latimer was dumfounded, for he would as soon have expected to find his hat gone and he unaware of the fact, but though he fumbled blindly for several seconds there was no sign of the watch.

Quickly his thoughts went over the case, and as he knew it had not escaped alone, there could be but one solution of the affair.

While he had read his letter that honest man, The Flea, had stolen back the watch so ostentatiously returned.

"The villain! the accursed thief!" cried Latimer, hotly. "I will overtake him and tear his vile carcass in pieces!"

And then he dashed toward the chaparral, his face convulsed with passion, his breath passing his lips hissing and his blood at fever pitch. Woe be to The Honest Flea if he then fell into the avenger's hands!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TRAGEDY DEEPENS.

LATIMER'S chances of overtaking the Texas Vulture did not seem strong, but at the speed he was going there was no doubt but he was decreasing the fellow's lead.

Hot-blooded as the Virginian was he had never been in such a passion before. The blow had cut deep and wide, and for the time he was little less than a madman. He believed he saw the whole truth; the Vulture Queen, base and unscrupulous always, had never had any intention of keeping her promise, and she had sent one of her ruffians with the watch merely that by stealing it a second time she could deal the deluded Virginian a blow such as his wildest dreams had never conceived.

With this idea in his mind he rushed on toward the chaparral. Now and then he stumbled

and nearly fell, but he was not to be discouraged, and he almost flew over the ground.

As the wood grew near his eager gaze detected a man in front of him, one going in the same direction as himself, and, he had no doubt, The Flea.

The discovery brought a shout from his lips.

"Halt, there! Scoundrel! villain! I am on your track; face me if you dare!"

It was not the watch he hungered for then; the passion which swayed him was a thirst for vengeance.

The man in advance turned his head quickly, looked for a moment and then broke into a run.

His pace was not equal to Latimer's, but the wood was near at hand and he made for it in frightened silence. Once more the pursuer shouted, and then, as he saw his quarry would reach shelter ahead of him, drew his revolver and fired twice in succession.

The pursued did not falter, however, and in a moment more the bushes opened and closed at his desperate rush.

But Latimer was near at hand and he shot forward with renewed speed.

In his hot haste he forgot the bank, and as he plunged into the dark shadow his feet failed to find solid ground and he fell. Down, down for a distance which nearly drove the breath from his body, but his courage was as good as ever and he tried to rise.

Tried, only to fail.

For stout hands were on him, and even in the gloom he saw men about him; a discovery which did not surprise him, for it was easy to see he had run into a nest of the Vultures.

He struck out with his clinched hand and one man went down, but in another moment his arms were pinioned to his side and his struggles were in vain.

"Curse it!" exclaimed a rough voice, "kill the dog!"

Ready hands were there to carry out the order, and down on Latimer's head descended heavy revolver butts, impelled by all the strength of muscular arms. Thud followed thud, but he was unconscious of the majority.

His senses, perhaps his life, had left him.

"Has he got enough?" asked the former voice.

They ceased striking. Latimer lay like a log in their grasp. One man thrust his hand into his garments, seeking for his heart.

"Dead as a stone!" was his unfeeling verdict.

"Toss him to the crows, then. He'll make good meat for some strong-stomached beast!"

They tossed the body from them and it rolled sullenly down the remainder of the bank, crashing in the leaves and dry branches.

"Pity we can't take his ears to Tiger-Lily!" coarsely observed the leading assassin, "but we are not meat-carriers. Come, boys, we have other work to do. Follow me!"

They stole away in single file. For a little time their movements were audible in the chaparral, and then dead silence reigned around the scene of the tragedy. Darkness was over all and the bushes told no tale, but at the foot of the bank lay a man whose eyes stared upward without seeing; whose pale face was like a white spot in the darkness; whose form was as senseless as the boulder beside him.

And the fast-gathering pool of blood beside him spoke in a voice silent in reality but loud in its mute show of a tragedy dark and foul, of a deed fit in its character for the night, the somber wood and the lawless dwellers therein.

What hope remained for Walter Latimer?

That same evening Abbott Woodbank was alone in his chamber. He had deserted the room where the family usually passed their evenings without apology or explanation and, once in his own apartment, had locked the door and darkened the window.

Then, with a stout key, he opened the chest the midnight intruders had failed to force.

It was little less than a safe, in its way, being made of planks of seasoned wood, while its appearance showed it had long been in use.

Woodbank had known its character too well to worry when he knew robbers had been there; the lock was of such an intricate pattern that he did not believe any burglar could force back the bolt without the key, and this article he kept where it would be hard to find.

The chest was full of papers, the majority of them referring to business transacted since he had been on the prairie ranch, though others dated back to the old Virginia days.

He now examined all these papers slowly and carefully, old and new, but each came to light and in good condition.

It was not the nature of the stately ranch-owner to indulge in Hamlet-like soliloquies, but from his manner it was clear many of the papers had a more than ordinary value. What recollections they recalled he knew best, but when the work was done he relocked the chest and, hiding the key, began to pace the floor thoughtfully.

His mind was on the recent attempt at robbery, which was not so much of a mystery as he had pretended. Pedro Lopez had told him the story of the lost slippers and embellished it as his fertile fancy suggested, but Woodbank

had quietly put aside the theory that Walter Latimer was concerned in the attempt.

He did not believe the young man capable of indulging in such work, and he did think he could place his hand on the real culprits, figuratively speaking.

And as he paced the floor he was reviewing the past and trying to settle several points which had, of late, grown uncertain.

While thus engaged there was a knock at the door and a servant appeared to say that Pedro Lopez was below and wished to see him.

For very good reasons Mr. Woodbank was always at the service of his overseer, and he went down at once.

The Mexican looked as serious when his employer entered as though he had come to attend a funeral, but he assumed his old, bland manner readily.

"I am glad to see you, señor," he said. "They told me, at first, that you were out."

"They were wrong, as you see," replied Woodbank, sitting down. "Is there anything new?"

"I have come on business, señor," Lopez replied, a little awkwardly. "I have been with you a good while, and—a—we are useful to each other."

"Yes," Woodbank admitted, uneasily, for he knew Pedro well enough to anticipate something which might be unpleasant.

"You are an employer to whose interests I am devoted," said the Mexican, insinuatingly, "and I may say your welfare depends a good deal on me."

"Come to the point, at once," Woodbank nervously directed.

"As you will, señor. Very well, then; I have looked with pleasure and admiration on your daughter, Miss Constance, and as such a thing would bind us even closer, I now request her hand in marriage."

Pedro twisted his somber features into what would pass for a smile, but a look which was almost terror appeared on Woodbank's face.

"No, no, Lopez!" he exclaimed. "Not that, not that!"

Pedro's face did not change expression.

"Caramba! and why not that?"

"You and I are good friends, Pedro, and I have never denied you anything before, but I do not believe in—in—mixing the nationalities. You and Constance are very different and—and—very different."

The speaker waded hopelessly through troubled waters, but the fact was evident that he did not view the Mexican's offer with favor.

"Speak plainly," said Lopez, coolly. "Say you do not want me, Pedro Lopez, for a son-in-law!"

"My dear Pedro—"

"I could make myself your 'dear Pedro,'" said the fellow, with a wicked expression.

"You, señor, have been indiscreet enough to place yourself in my power. A word from me would—"

"Forbear!" exclaimed the elder man. "Walls have ears, you know; forbear!"

"As the husband of Constance I will forbear; I will be as silent as the grave. As a rejected suitor—caramba! that is different, very different!"

Abbott Woodbank was very pale, and the hand which rested on the arm of his chair trembled perceptibly. Pedro had made no vain boast when he spoke of his influence on the ranch. If he had asked for anything except Constance, it would have been given, but he was going too far when the last demand was made. It had been the great hope of Woodbank's life to see his daughter married to a man who occupied a high social position, and in a more settled district than Deerfoot Prairie, could give her the honors for which her high birth and natural gifts had fitted her.

But Pedro Lopez—

The man had been useful to Woodbank in many ways before that day—too useful, by far, as was now proved—but in the face of this demand he wished the low-born, vicious fellow had died before they ever met.

Woodbank was under torture, as his expression proved, but Pedro watched him with cool calculation.

In turn, both men were watched by a third party, who looked in at the window, enjoying the scene even more than the Mexican.

This was Jarl Belvin, the so-called chaparral hermit, and his face expressed all the pleasure of which it seemed capable. This man hated Abbott Woodbank with a hatred which could never die, and every stab at him, by whoever inflicted, was pleasure to Jarl Belvin.

The man was reckless to be there at such an hour, and just after the recent attempt at robbery, for he was not loved by Woodbank, but he was not of a nature to shrink before any danger.

CHAPTER XV.

MISFORTUNES GO IN PAIRS.

WOODBANK tried to recover his coolness and speak with such a show of reason that the Mexican would be shown the impracticability of his proposal, but he might as well have tried to move a rock. Pedro had considered the matter

in advance, and knowing his power, was not prepared to abate one jot or tittle of his demand—for it was nothing less.

Yet the proud ranch-owner humbled himself, and made an argument which was little less than an appeal. Humbled himself, only to have it received with a deaf ear.

Pedro made no threats, no loud talk, but he was amiably stubborn, with his old element of sneering devilry running through all. He had fixed his mind on Constance, and would be content with nothing else.

"I must, at least, have time to consider your proposal," finally said the desperate ranch-owner.

"I see no need of it, but let it be as you say. I will deal gently, as is my nature, but it may be well for you to remember that meditation cannot change the state of affairs. I have decided, and whatever I say must be so."

"Lopez," said Woodbank, appealingly, "don't grind me entirely into the dust!"

"*Madre de Dios!* why should I do that? Are not our interests identical? We sink or swim together, as you Americans say. I only ask you to remember I am Pedro Lopez."

"Would to God I could forget it!" Woodbank exclaimed.

"Caramba! Why does so little a thing make you ill? Once you were not so faint hearted. When your money was at stake, and the wagon-train was on the prairie—"

"Enough!" interrupted the elder man. "Not another word!"

"You do not want me to tell? I thought not! Good! When your daughter is my wife my lips are sealed forever. A word to the wise is sufficient. And now, kind señor, I will go to my own quarters and leave you to meditate. *Hasta manana!*"

With a smile which was diabolical in its gloating, sneering, triumphant nature, the son of Mexico wormed his way out of the room and was gone.

When the door closed behind him, Woodbank sprung to his feet and gazed after him with intense rage and hatred expressed on his face. Whatever the cause for love or enmity between them, it seemed in Abbott Woodbank's heart then to do murder if he dared.

His white, aristocratic hand went into his coat and clutched at his breast, as though some monster was tearing there and must be destroyed, and Constance would have shrunk away had she seen her father then.

But she did not see him, and so far as he knew, no one did. He did not know of the man at the window.

Growing a little calmer, he began pacing the floor. He had gone back and forth half a dozen times, when, in one of his turns, he came suddenly face to face with Jarl Belvin.

The chaparral hermit had noiselessly entered at the window and stood composedly regarding the master of the house.

The latter started back, and surprise and consternation were for a moment stamped on his face. Then anger assumed their place.

"How dare you come here, sir?" he cried.

"Fear, Abbott Woodbank, is a feeling I know nothing about. As for my motive, I came because it pleased me."

"I'll make it anything but pleasant!" declared Woodbank, as he started for the door.

"Stop!" said Jarl, putting out one hand.

"We want no third party here, for our business needs no witness. I should not have come in, but while passing I chanced to hear you and Pedro Lopez talking. I see the viper you warmed is showing his fangs now and making matters uncomfortable."

"What is that to you?" Woodbank hotly demanded.

"A good deal, for when rogues fall out honest men may win. Come, Abbott Woodbank, put on no airs with me. You and I understand each other. We have met before. Once—you may remember the time—I stood at a post over yonder, my person nude from neck to waist, and by your order I was flogged until the blood ran down my limbs. Or have you forgotten it, Abbott Woodbank?"

The cold, heavy face of the hermit did not change, but in his eyes was a glitter which told of a passion like the half-hidden fire of a smoldering volcano.

"I have not forgot, nor have I regretted it. I am only sorry you were not more fitly punished. You dared strike me a heavy blow."

"Bah!" said Jarl, scornfully. "It was but a pat of my hand. Had I struck you in earnest, you would never have given the order for the flogging. I deem this a fit time to recall what I then said, since the threatened quarrel with Lopez makes it possible for me to unravel all the threads of that old drama. He may confess and bring you to the gallows."

"Liar! there is nothing to confess!" Woodbank declared.

"It is false!" said Jarl, with cool confidence. "Down under the sod of the prairie sleeps one I have sworn to revenge, and I am going to do it. I came to you, some months ago, and asked for information regarding the slaughtered train. You denied that you could give any; I said you spoke falsely; you called me a liar; I struck you

with my open hand and you ordered me flogged. Well, I am not sorry. After that there was a motive for vengeance if not before; whether or not you were concerned in the wagon-train tragedy, it was you who had me flogged as a dog is flogged."

"And it shall be done again!" Woodbank exclaimed.

"It shall not be done again!" Jarl steadily returned but in his manner was an indescribable power which forced the ranch owner to pause. "Once, only, did I bare my back for your whip; once, only, will your whip touch it. It need not have been so then. There is strength in these arms,"—and he stretched them out, long and muscle-knotted—"which your birchings would have felt, had it not been for one thing. I was not sure you were concerned in the train-tragedy and I wanted something which would keep alive my hatred for you. I have it where your whip scarred my back!"

"Enough!" cried Woodbank; "I will not stay longer to hear a madman talk. Out of my way!"

"Wait!" said Jarl, with his unwavering coolness. "You shall hear me through. You had better have killed me the day I was flogged, for from that moment it was your life or mine. I come of a race that never forgets. And now the hour of my vengeance is near!"

Woodbank dropped back in his chair with a groan. He had long believed the hermit partially insane, and there no longer seemed any doubt about it. Yet, there was enough of method in his madness to make him dangerous, and there was cause to watch him well, even while he partly tolerated his presence as a nuisance hard to get rid of.

Woodbank, however, had no fear of personal violence then; he had a revolver in his pocket, and if driven to the wall, would not hesitate to use it, as little as he desired Jarl Belvin's blood on his hands.

"Well, what do you want?" he finally demanded.

"The truth. Your tool, Lopez, has made a demand you are not inclined to grant. It is in your power to throw off your yoke of bondage, and lighting those you wronged years ago, baffle this sleek, but devilish, Mexican, and send him about his business. Think well before you answer this, for a good deal may depend upon it."

Belvin spoke with less severity than usual, and his voice was full of reason, but Woodbank laughed unmercifully.

"You rave!" he said. "I have wronged no one. I am innocent of all the blame you place at my door, and, above all, I am capable of attending to my own affairs. I will trouble you to let them alone."

"Be careful!"

"Do you threaten?"

"I speak now for another person than myself, and, sinking all personal feeling, ask you to do justice, tardy though it be, to those you have wronged."

His strong voice was solemn and earnest, but a new light leaped into Woodbank's eyes.

"Beware yourself, Jarl Belvin. I begin to know you as you are, and unless you take yourself off and let me alone, I will have you seized as an accomplice of the Texas Vulture!"

A cold smile crossed the hermit's lips.

"You haven't men enough to take me, Abbott Woodbank. You do not yet fully know the power of the man you flogged on an occasion before mentioned. I have delayed my vengeance and made you and others think I was only a half-mad hermit, but it was because I had been asked to delay my return blow."

"Ha! then you admit—"

"That I am the friend of Tiger-Lily? Yes. I am her friend. I do not claim that she is an angel, for there are dark deeds laid at the door of the Texas Vulture; there is blood on their hands; but whatever she is, you made her. I am not one of her band, as I will trouble you to recollect, but I am her friend, bound to her by ties stronger than good fortune can give. It was in her service that Neal Belvin met his fate."

Woodbank listened, but no longer with indifference. Every word from Jarl's lips showed him that a pit was yawning at his feet. Where all had been vague before, a dark, menacing skeleton of the past now arose, and, without disguise, stared him in the face.

He saw in the chaparral hermit a man who would be harmless only when he was out of life's battle.

Such a man, holding the secrets he did, was not a safe neighbor for the master of Deerfoot Ranch, whom all men outside of Thornpath Chaparral held to be a highly respectable person.

Woodbank resolved to end the suspense at once.

His hand went inside his coat and grasped his revolver, but the eyes of Jarl Belvin were keen and watchful. With a light spring he gained the elder man's side, and, as the revolver came out, wrested it away with one turn of his powerful wrist.

Crushed down by a strength he could by no means equal, Woodbank sat dismayed, for-

getting that a call for help would arouse the house.

"I do not know why I spare you longer," said Jarl, looking at him with gleaming eyes, "but I remember my pledge to another. You may live awhile longer, yet your wildest midnight dreams will not be more terrible than the swift-advancing reality."

Woodbank did not answer, and when the hermit looked more closely he saw the man had fainted.

And there his servants found him, a little later, alone. There was no sign of Jarl Belvin, nor had any one seen the hermit, and when Woodbank was resuscitated, after alarm and hard work, his late visitor's name did not pass his lips.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WHITE FACE IN THE CHAPARRAL.

THE following morning the Texas Chick crossed the prairie and struck Thornpath Chaparral at a point in a line with Woodbank's house. He did not want to be seen by any one employed on the ranch, or by the dwellers in the wood, for he had started for the interior of the place to look for the lair of the Vultures.

Having broken with Latimer, he was more in earnest than ever in his resolution to still-hunt the outlaws down.

Because of his desire for secrecy, he kept along in the edge of the wood, at the foot of the bank where the underbrush was less thick than beyond.

He was moving in this way when a wolf suddenly shot off from ahead of him, frightened by his approach. Such a thing was common and Zeb paid little attention to it, but when he reached the place from which the animal started, he suddenly paused.

For, on the ground he saw a man, or his body; for the still face upturned to the sky was white and set, like that of a dead man, and the dark hair clustering about his forehead was matted with blood.

The Texas Chick looked in surprise.

"Latimer!" he then muttered, staring blankly. "Latimer hyar, an' dead!"

It was a strange occurrence, but he had seen too many scenes of bloodshed and violence to run away or stand like a post. Down on his knees he went and his hands quickly sought for signs of life.

"He ain't gone yet!" was his comment. "There is life in his carcass, but his comb is most durnedly cut an' I reckon he never'll peep much more."

The rough prairie-man shivered as he touched the aged wounds on the Virginian's head.

"Somebody hez been afool on him in ther wust way an' jist battered him all ter pieces. Reckon a stun' or club did it. Hello! what's this?"

He had discovered a white paper pinned to the wounded man's coat, and he quickly released and unfolded it.

There he saw several words written in a delicate, woman-like chirography:

"Compliments of Tiger Lily, the Vulture Queen. Moral: Do not meddle with those stronger than yourself."

A forcible exclamation fell from the Texas Chick's lips.

"Ther inhuman wretch!" he cried: "this is too much. Darnation beetles! it ez bad enough ter murder a man without cacklin' over it. But I bain't surprised; I've knowed all along she was possessed o' seven devils an' I reckon they've got loose. Pore young feller! I'm sorry fur him; durn my feathers ef I ain't!"

Zeb was brooding over him as though he had been a veritable corpse, but he suddenly aroused and went to work with a will.

Lifting the insensible form gently, he bore it a few steps away to where a spring of pure water gushed from the bank. Laying him down there he proceeded with surgeon-like skill to do what was necessary.

The flow of blood from the wounds had already ceased and the life-fluid was drying in a bad way, but Zeb washed it off and cleansed the wounds remarkably well. He found them less dangerous than he had thought, too, and unless there was a fracture of the skull, Latimer stood a fair chance of recovery.

The Texas Chick did not cease work then, but, keeping on, used every means of resuscitation known to him, and his knowledge proved to be very extensive for a prairie man.

His labors bade fair to be successful, too, in the end, for signs of returning consciousness were ultimately visible.

Another lapse of time and Latimer opened his eyes.

Zeb smiled genially.

"Woke up, hain't you. Wal, it's about time, fur rosy blush o' day's flingin' up its heels an' percolatin' through ther bush."

The Virginian looked at him without a sign of recognition.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Zeb White, commonly called ther Texas Chick, an' right lively I am on ther cackle, too."

"I should like to know what you're doing here," said the wounded man, severely.

"Merely dropped 'round ter see ef you're ready ter go hum."

"I resent this interference with my private affairs and shall report you to the professor. You have no right in the gymnasium," declared Latimer, with increasing severity.

"Hope you'll s'cuse me this time," said the Chick, seeing that his companion's mind was wandering.

"This trapeze is free to all, and I am under the impression the dumb-bells belong to the college, not to you."

"Didn't think on't before but now perceive you're right. I apologize fur all short-comin's an' hope you'll overlook it. Will you go home, now?"

"No, sir, I will not: I'm going to remain here all night."

"Yas, but, see hyar. S'pose ther Vulture Queen happens along?"

Latimer started.

"The Vulture Queen?" he echoed.

"Yas."

The wounded man raised his hand to his forehead in a puzzled way but withdrew it as, touching higher, he encountered one of his injuries.

"I think my mind has wandered," he said, suddenly. "I am weak, ill, injured. How did it happen? Hal! I remember something. I came out to meet Tiger-Lily and was deceived and led into an ambush. They assaulted me, struck me over the head with their revolvers and left me to die. I remember all and— Zeb, Zeb, I retract what I said. I do not withdraw from our league; we will work together still and hunt that infamous woman down. Lead the way; lead the way! Where are my weapons?"

He started to a sitting position, showing more strength than was to be expected, but the Texas Chick, not for a moment believing he had come out to meet Tiger-Lily or one of her band, supposed his mind still wandering, and spoke soothingly to him.

But at that moment Latimer's gaze fell upon the paper, and he caught it up.

"Her writing!" he said; "the same as in the other note. What has she written now? 'Compliments of Tiger-Lily, the Vulture Queen. Moral: Do not meddle with those stronger than yourself.' Zeb, Zeb, where did this come from?"

"It was pinned ter yer coat," the Chick acknowledged.

"I feel!" almost shouted the Virginian. "She thought she had given me my death, and was exulting over the fact—and that, too, after I had spared her. Her perfidy is almost beyond belief; she is the basest wretch living. Ay; but I'll hunt her down; with my last dream I'll find and punish her! Lead the way, Zeb; lead the way! There is no time to lose. Up, man, and get to work; lead the way! I'll seek her as a bloodhound seeks its prey; I'll meet her as remorselessly as a tiger of the chaparral. Lead the way, Zeb, lead—the-way!"

He had gained his feet, despite the Texas Chick's efforts to quiet him, and the words were wildly poured forth; but the effort was too much for him; he wavered, staggered, his head fell and he lay once more insensible in the strong arms of his companion.

It was no more than the prairie-man expected, and he laid him gently down by the spring.

He saw that the wounded man's condition was serious, and that he should at once be conveyed to a more suitable place. There was but one near, and that was Woodbank's house.

Resolved to gain help as soon as possible, he hastened up the bank. Luck was with him, for, not far away, he saw some of the rancheros.

His powerful voice soon summoned them, and he led the way to where Latimer still lay in his swoon. Directed by Zeb, the men were not long in preparing a rude litter, and on this the Virginian was laid, and the return begun.

How different it was from the way in which he left the house. Then, in the pride of his strength he had gone out, hoping for the best, to test the honor of Tiger-Lily. It had been tested, and he was going back like a dead man, her mocking epitaph over his body reposing in his pocket, where the Texas Chick had hastily thrust it.

There had been uneasiness and grave fears at the house when, in the morning, it was found Latimer was absent, and that he had not been in his bed; but close after the discovery came the truth and he was laid on a bed from which he might never arise alive.

No one there felt more dismay and regret than the elder Woodbank, and Zeb, who had been a pariah in his sight before, was invited in, made comfortable and plied with questions.

The faithful fellow showed rare judgment and told no more than was advisable; while, believing Walter might repeat his raving, and beginning, like a sensible man, to think it possible the Virginian had indeed gone out to meet Tiger-Lily; he prepared Woodbank's mind for such a state of affairs by mentioning any quantity of wild ideas he declared Walter had poured upon him.

It was well and wisely done, and if the young

man *did* mutter about his midnight meeting, there was a way in which Woodbank would be likely to explain it and suspect nothing.

The nearest doctor was several miles away; but a ranchero was sent on a fleet horse while more tender, if less skillful, hands cared for the patient.

It was on Constance and Moza that the balance of the work fell, but they were fully equal to its requirements. The latter in particular, showed a commendable skill, and Miss Woodbank spared no pains to save her handsome cousin who was only a cousin by courtesy.

Later, the doctor came and did what was necessary. Brain and skull had escaped serious injury, he found, and if a weakening fever could be avoided the Virginian would be out of bed much sooner than they expected.

And to baffle that fever every effort was therefore made.

One good result of the affair was that Lopez came to Woodbank and said he would defer his suit until Latimer was better, a decision that gave the elder man great relief.

But he was far from being at ease. Believing the attack on Latimer to be the first blow at him in a warfare jointly declared by Jarl Belvin and Tiger-Lily, he looked for the second blow every hour.

Jarl had been searched for, but his cabin was empty. The ranch-owner was not surprised. After what had occurred he expected to hear of him again only in a sanguinary way.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE OVERSEER'S WAR-PARTY.

DURING the afternoon Pedro Lopez called on Woodbank.

"What do you think of our charming neighbor, Tiger-Lily, after this affair?" he asked, when he had inquired concerning Latimer's condition.

"My first feeling was that I would like to see her lynched," the ranch-owner replied, "but since I have had time to think, I feel more like hanging myself."

His gloomy manner merely brought a smile to Pedro's face.

"Why so, señor?"

"I am the cause of this, Lopez. But for me she would have been a respectable member of society, but my—my—what I did, drove her to crime and straight on down the path to ruin. Just think of such a mere girl having such an appalling crime as this at her door. They tell me there is a chance for Walter's life, but that does not lessen her guilt."

"I don't know why you should shoulder it."

"I tell you I drove her to ruin."

"Nonsense! All's fair in the game of life, and when she found you had won a move from her, why didn't she go to work and carve herself an honorable name instead of taking to crime?"

"She was a mere girl, and, friendless and discouraged, she took to crime as many a woman has done before, because the down road is the easiest to travel."

"*Caramba!* your reasoning is too fine for me. It don't suit me. I am not thinking of suicide."

"Would to Heaven I had thought of it years ago."

Lopez arose from his chair, went to where a black bottle stood on a shelf and brought it to his companion.

"Drink, *amigo mio!*" he said, "and forget your troubles in the liquid which turns sorrow to joy, black to white, and thorns to roses. Drink, señor, drink!"

He spoke with an assumption of gayety, and Woodbank did not decline. The fiery drink was perceptibly lowered when he removed it from his mouth.

"Now, then," resumed the overseer, "let us look at this matter as I see it. Tiger-Lily is your deadly foe, and she intends to some day strike a blow at your life. I cannot doubt it, though she has for some time been your neighbor and kept her bravos from your throat; the villainous attack on Latimer proves her latent hostility. Your turn will come next. Will it? *Madre de Dios!* it need not. Shall I tell you the way out?"

"Ay; tell me at once."

"Every one in Texas would applaud if the Vultures were broken up and captured. Such being the case, why not please Texas and destroy your enemies by a prompt movement against the gang? Find and seize them, and in a month every Vulture will be hung higher than Haman."

"Find them? That is easy to say."

"Give me charge of your rancheros and it shall be done, I am no fool, if I do say it. *Mira!* I am Pedro Lopez, and what I try to do I accomplish. Give me the men and Tiger-Lily's career is over!"

Woodbank's remorse had disappeared before the potent touch of the whisky, and when Lopez had convinced him his idea was practicable, permission was readily given to use the rancheros.

Thus it was that, the following morning, a war-party left the house to seek for the Vultures, Pedro Lopez and the Texas Chick at the

head. Zeb had somehow gained the reputation of knowing a good deal about the chaparral, which was the only thing which led Lopez to ask him to join them.

When asked, the Chick had at first declined to go but, changing his mind, had revealed his plan of getting at the heart of the wood by means of the stream flowing south from the lake in the swamp.

Then every one wondered the plan had not been thought of before, and Zeb was looked upon with increased respect.

They left the house before daybreak and hastened to the place where the stream debouched from the wood.

Once there their troubles began.

The stream lacked a good deal of being a river, for it was only six feet wide where it came forth to light, and decidedly shallow, at that; but they began operations with commendable zeal.

The Texas Chick went ahead, and, in single file, they disappeared in the jungle, walking in the bed of the stream.

For a time it was like a hall-way in a house, the walls of green meeting over their heads, but the brook was found to be a fickle one, contriving to work its way through a mere fissure in places, and their knives were brought into use to force a way through the thorn-covered bushes.

Zeb's unfailing good humor came into needed use, and even Lopez was kept from losing temper. Some of the men showed signs of wavering courage, for they could not help thinking how they might be slaughtered by a properly-placed enemy, but as they dared not retreat, all kept on and made the best of it.

A disappointment awaited them, however, when they reached a place where the stream seemed to end—or, more properly, begin at a spring—but Zeb easily saw that its course was under the surface for a distance and they went on again.

Thus, hours passed. They made progress, but it was slow and scarcely a man had escaped smarting wounds from the paths. And the stream could not be regained.

Something better was at last found, however. Without any warning they came upon a regular bridle-path, the condition of which showed frequent use by previous travelers.

The spirits of the party arose and, after a brief halt, the journey was resumed with fresh confidence.

The Texas Chick did not join in the loud boasting of the other men. He had seen enough of the Vultures to believe they were capable of any lawless deed, and with their superior knowledge of the chaparral they could defeat, or even annihilate, a force several times their own number.

So Zeb began to cordially wish he had held to his plan of still-hunting and let Pedro Lopez engineer his own expedition.

The Mexican was inclined to be patronizing and gracious to his guide, but the Chick had a way of shutting people out when he didn't take a fancy to them, and it was clear Pedro did not stand high in his esteem.

For a considerable distance the party had an open road, where two men could easily walk abreast, but it ended abruptly at a perfect hedge of bushes.

The rancheros looked in surprise not unmixed with awe, for their superstitions were coming to the front, but Zeb's dirty face was serene and calm.

He drew his bowie and, finding the least difficult spot, attacked the bushes and hewed a way through steadily, if slow; but their real trouble had only begun. From there they found no path, nor could the brook be regained, and it was one long fight with the bushes and thorns, where nothing but a compass Lopez had taken kept them down to a direct course.

The Texas Chick showed a disposition to be fair by letting the other men take their turns at the front. He had come without hope of any material reward and did not feel inclined to cut a path for them, especially in so dangerous a locality.

Yet, it was only a matter of time, since the Vultures did not appear to bar their way, and, at last, they reached a more open region and saw at their left a swamp. The sight encouraged them, for the swamp was said to lie but little south of the lake, but as it was also reputed to be most treacherous footing they did not venture there.

Pushing north they looked for the lake and soon found it.

Even the rough rancheros paused to admire its beauty.

Between one and two acres of land was overflowed and this extent was without a tree, bush or rock to break the silvery sheen of the limpid water, but on all sides the bushes met the lake like a gigantic hedge. In shape the lake was oblong and strangely regular, and its beauty could not well be exaggerated.

Still, the invaders were practical men on a practical errand and they soon turned again to the north. There the range of hills, beginning at the water stretched away for some distance and looked wild and fit for an outlaws' home.

"We are on the scent, praise the Virgin!" said Lopez. "Within those hills the desperadoes undoubtedly have their home, and I consider our work nearly done. We have only to find them, now."

"An' take 'em," added Zeb, dryly.

"Do you doubt our ability to do that?" the Mexican contemptuously asked.

"Like ez not we kin; likelier we kin not."

"Are you afraid?"

"I don't feel ther battle-fire a-surgin' in my veins overly," the Chick frankly admitted; "but I'm in at ther death an' I reckon I'll foller whar ye lead ef it takes ev'ry feather off my carcass an' cuts my comb close up."

"There is no occasion for hesitation. *Carajo!* what are these Vulture? Dogs who skulk in the bush and attack only when the odds are wholly in their favor. Look at Latimer's case! What could be more cowardly? Our brave fellows will make them run away like wolves."

The rancheros rattled their weapons and applauded these remarks, but it was noticeable that they spoke in a subdued key and kept watch warily for possible danger.

"When they begin ter run we must come out strong," said Zeb, "an' you kin depend on me ter use my spurs for all they're worth. Lead on, Captain Lopez."

"Follow me!" said the overseer, valiantly. "Have your arms ready for use, men, and if I give the word to fire, make every shot tell!"

The Texas Chick smiled grimly but, when the party started, fell back to the rear. It was plain he had no desire to figure at the front, but he had presence of mind enough to take an extra chew of tobacco and his eyes were never at rest.

Lopez skirted the lake and wound around toward the range. The way was comfortably open and he kept watch ahead rather than around him; and thus it was that, while crossing a low-lying place, he suddenly found his feet sinking in mud.

He made a dash and gained the trunk of a fallen tree, while frightened exclamations behind him told his men were facing even worse.

He turned to look at them. Before the first alarm they had been following in single file, but when treacherous footing was discovered they remembered the current tales about places in the chaparral where the ground was miry and would, and had, swallowed men up without a chance for a priest's blessing.

All this served to put them in a panic and they made a rush which prostrated some, and the whole party, except Zeb, were soon floundering in the slough and uttering most lugubrious cries as the mud sucked their feet down.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TEXAS VULTURES ARE FOUND.

CONSTERNATION had seized upon the rancheros, but as self preservation is the first law of nature, they did not fail to make a desperate attempt to save their lives, and the Texas Chick, standing on firm ground, chuckled audibly to see the valiant warriors floundering wildly and calling on their patron saints and Pedro Lopez to save them.

But they saved themselves by an effort and one and all climbed on the log where their leader had taken refuge.

Then Zeb could no longer restrain his mirth, but laughed aloud at their appearance. Every one except Lopez was smeared with mud to the knees, and so much had spat in their rush their faces were speckled.

They forgot to look at themselves, however, when Zeb's laugh was taken up and echoed all around, from the four points of the compass and from the tree-tops, and Pedro erected his head and looked with warlike zeal for the men who laughed.

Not one was visible.

"How do you like the battle thus far, Pedro Lopez?" cried a mocking voice.

Beyond a doubt it was a woman who spoke, but when Pedro looked he could see no one. The thick leaves screened the speaker, though the words had seemed to come from a tree-top. The Texas Chick, however, ceased laughing; he had recognized the voice of Tiger Lily.

"Welcome to my kingdom, valiant Pedro!" the Vulture Queen resumed. "We have waited for you long, and now you are here! your welcome shall be a warm one!"

"Show yourself, if you dare!" shouted the Mexican, angrily. "*Carajo!* are you all cowards to hide in the bush?"

"You shall see us if you wish. Look behind you, valiant Pedro!"

The overseer looked, his muscles tensely strung to use his rifle with all speed when he saw a human head; but though the head was there he did not fire.

He had good reason to refrain. Ten men stood in a line, forty feet away, each with a rifle at his shoulder, each glancing along a polished barrel.

"Make one hostile movement and you shall be riddled with bullets, Pedro Lopez!" resumed the voice. "Look to your right!"

Again the overseer turned. There stood a

second line of men like the first, and twenty rifles were covering his precious party; twenty Vultures were there!

"Look to the south, Pedro Lopez!"

The overseer obeyed. He saw a third line of men, and thirty now made a total; thirty Vultures were there!

"Keep your hands in place, Pedro Lopez!" added Tiger-Lily. "You are here to annihilate us, as you have freely stated, and we would be fools to show you mercy after that; keep your hands in place and your weapons down or we will give you like for like. Be wise and you may be saved. Stand where you are for a moment and you shall see me, also."

The Mexican was purple with rage. He was not a coward, as men go, but he knew enough to keep out of fire; he saw that the tide of luck was all against him, and that, for the moment, he must obey the orders given. But, reluctant to abandon his attempt, he waited and watched for a chance to strike in return.

It was a ludicrous sight to see those bold warriors, Mexicans, Americans and negroes, who had gone out from Deerfoot Ranch so valorously, now huddled together on the log, mud covered and trembling, like a lot of Christmas turkeys trussed for use.

The Texas Chick had not stirred from his place, but he was done laughing. If he lacked the foolhardiness to begin a useless war, he was not coward enough to run away; so he kept his place and held his rifle irresolutely.

He was still there when a voice sounded behind him.

"Do not turn your head, Zeb White. I am your friend if you will have it so. Not a motion to put Lopez on his guard."

Once more it was the Vulture Queen who spoke, and as the Texas Chick had good nerves, and was not reluctant to be gently dealt with, he obeyed, and stood with his face to the man on the log and his back to Tiger-Lily, who was still screened by the bushes.

"I'm bearkin'," he replied.

"You are in bad company when you march with Lopez," she resumed.

"Twixt him an' you I believe I am," the Chick confessed.

"Enough of that. You are the only man here for whose future I care a picayune, and as I don't want you hurt, let me caution you not to use that long rifle of yours. The other men will not fight. You are sort of left out, and I want to blind Lopez to the fact that you are favored. Do you see?"

"Yes," Zeb slowly replied; but he suspected a good deal more than he understood, and believed the Vulture Queen had some use for him.

"Then be wise and avoid suspicion. I am going to Lopez now. Not a word or motion!"

There was a rustling of the bushes and she was gone. Zeb stood in uncertainty. What web was being woven around him? He did not think highly enough of Tiger-Lily to believe she had shown him favor without some deliberate scheme in view.

While he meditated she appeared at a point near the men on the log. She was dressed in a scarlet jacket, which was half concealed by a blanket or cloak flung over her shoulders; a black skirt and black hat, around which curved a white ostrich plume, with other details which served to make her dashing and attractive, but no one looked at her with admiration.

"So you are still there," she said, looking at Lopez. "I am glad to see you; you are welcome to Thornpath Chaparral!"

"It is your hour of triumph now; mine will yet come!" the overseer cried, in a rage. "I am not a man to forget a humiliation and I will tear up every tree of the wood but I'll get at you and have my revenge!"

"You would make a noble stump puller," she laughed, mockingly.

"Sneer on; my day will come!"

The face of the girl-outlaw suddenly changed.

"Your day came years ago, Pedro Lopez!" she cried. "It was when you led a band of Comanche warriors—fiends, rather, like yourself—down on a sleeping camp and butchered all there—all save myself. That attack was planned for my sake and you hoped to kill me as you did the others, but I escaped. No thanks to you, Pedro Lopez, for murder was in your vile heart. Perhaps you have fondly imagined I did not know you, but I heard your voice that night and I can never forget. Inhuman wretch! I cannot see how you sleep at night: I should think the blood of those you then killed would cry to you from the grave!"

The Mexican's face had lost its confidence, but he managed to answer defiantly:

"I know nothing of what you speak, but even if I had done wrong in the past, you are a poor person to preach—you, Tiger-Lily, the Vulture Queen!"

"Whatever I am you made me!" she retorted, passionately. "If Florence Riverton has given place to Tiger-Lily, the work began the night of the train massacre."

"I know nothing about it," he persisted.

"It is false! You are the white man who led the red murderers on their prey! The tables are now turned and it is in my power to avenge

the slaughter of that night. One word from me and every man of you dies where you are. But, sir, Tiger-Lily is not a butcher, and those who followed you here shall be dealt with as fools rather than as villains. Look to your feet, men!"

The direction was sudden and unexpected, but the rancheros mechanically looked down. Then many a face along the line grew whiter than before; the log on which they stood, and which had been well above the mire, at first, was now on a level with the surface and water was already collecting around their feet.

The log was sinking in the mud and they were going down with it!

Terror seized upon the rancheros. All the old stories they had heard of the death-sucking chaparral mire occurred to them; they had tried it once themselves and narrowly escaped; and the prospect of going down again was certainly enough to upset the nerves of the bravest men.

A jeering laugh sounded from the Vultures at the sight of this alarm, but the rancheros scarcely heard it.

The log had remained quiet while they did the same, but when they began to move the log began to lurch, and then a series of sharp cries arose as it quivered and went wholly under.

Before this cry the imperiled men forgot the rifles which covered them and each and all made a dive for safety. Lopez and one other man caught at the branches of the trees about them and tried to go higher; but the rest of the crowd plunged into the mud and began a second desperate battle, with the jeers of the outlaws to help them on and cheer their way.

No hand was raised against them and their progress was fair, everything considered, while the mud flew in every direction.

The Texas Chick saw all from his old position, but he no longer laughed. Perhaps the scene unnerved him—he was commonly called a coward—for he had dropped to the ground and crouched there with his eyes fixed dead ahead with a wild stare.

A brief period of suspense, and then all the rancheros except one safely reached firmer ground. The exception had struck the worst part of the slough at his first leap and, only a few feet from Lopez, and the latter's companion in the tree-climbing attempt, was sinking in the mud, his wild face white as snow.

Lopez and his comrade were not much better off. They had caught at the nearest branches, but when they endeavored to move higher they swayed so as to baffle all efforts and they could no more than hold fast.

It looked like a battle between life and death, but the Vulture Queen did not seem in the least touched. Her face was as calm and cold as though three fellow-creatures were not in utmost peril, with the treacherous mud yawning for their lives. Even then Lopez saw her look at him and a shiver ran through his body.

"If they try to climb higher, shoot both!" Tiger-Lily sternly directed, addressing the nearest file of men.

CHAPTER XIX.

TIGER-LILY'S VENGEANCE.

NOTHING could be more implacable than the voice and face of the Vulture Queen, and the Texas Chick, still crouching on the bank, shivered as though he was himself menaced. Evil as Pedro Lopez might be, it was a hard fate to die thus.

The order, however, had stirred the man in the mud to such exertions as he could make, and his voice arose in wild cries for help.

Nothing more was needed to unman Lopez, and his strength so deserted him that he lost his hold on the branch and shot down in the mud, where the wretch who had preceded him at once seized and tried to hold him, as a drowning man clutches at a straw.

Pedro, however, uttered a curse, and dashed his clinched hand in the man's face, caring only for his own safety, and then tried to flounder away.

Tiger-Lily spoke quickly to her men, and two of them dropped their rifles and seized lassoes instead; then casting them out, put relief in the way of the two rancheros and pulled them to the solid ground, leaving only Lopez in danger.

He had failed to get clear of the slough, and the mud was sucking him down. He struggled in vain, his wild eyes always turned to the shore where his followers were in the hands of the Vultures, and transformed from warriors into the meekest of captives.

"Cowards!" he shrieked, wildly. "White-livered, crawling dastards, why do you stand there? Will you see me die? Fight, curse you! Fight for me!"

A jeering laugh from the Vultures was the only reply given him, and seeing the folly of struggling, he turned his face toward Tiger-Lily. If ever a face pleaded for mercy, with its expression of abject, terrible fear, it was his then, and yet he looked without a word. Perhaps, because his tongue would not voice his plea.

For several seconds they looked at each other in silence. The Vulture Queen was as calm and cold as a statue.

"Pedro Lopez," she said, at length, "you now have a chance to look death in the face yourself. You made a helpless girl see the tragic side of life, out on the prairie, one dark night, with no pity save that of the wolf, and to-day she shows you that fickle fortune may ultimately leave the strong and cunning. How like you your punishment?"

"Mercy!" he muttered, feebly; "in the name of the Virgin, mercy!"

"Where am I to learn mercy?"

"You are a woman, do not be deaf to my words."

"I was a woman—or rather, a mere girl, that night when you led the red-handed Comanches down on the train."

"Oh, *Madre de Dios!* forget it; let me forget it!" the wretch implored.

Tiger-Lily laughed mockingly, but spoke again to her men, and a lasso was thrown out to the Mexican. He grasped the end, and after some labor, was pulled to firm land, weak and mud-covered.

He was turning to the Queen, but she interrupted him.

"Not a word!" she sternly said. "Your miserable life has not at any time been in danger, for though you came here to destroy us, I would not harm those who follow you, and your time is not yet come. We have played with you as a cat does with a mouse, to show that we are, indeed, rulers of Thornpath Chaparral. Hereafter, bear this fact in mind. Now, get your men in motion, and march them out of the wood under guard of the Vultures. Captain Scorpion, I leave this matter to you."

She waved her hand to one of her men, and then turned and disappeared in the undergrowth. The invaders saw her no more that day.

Captain Scorpion went zealously about his work. The rancheros had lost all their weapons except their knives, and no one thought of objecting when he formed them in line, and then started the whole party like sheep driven to market.

Not to dwell on the journey, enough to say they were escorted out of the chaparral and left wet, muddy and miserable on Deerfoot Ranch, but without receiving any rough usage by the way.

For awhile after being left alone they stood in silence, with nothing to say. Had they gone on a pleasure-trip, and come back in such condition, there would have been loud mirth; but if any one was disposed to make light of it as the matter stood, one look at Lopez's face was enough to check the impulse.

Dark and forbidding as his face usually was, it outdid itself on this occasion, but his rage was not of the kind which vents itself in empty words.

Perceiving that all were looking to him for orders, he spoke in a voice which was huskily calm.

"We have been beaten this time, but the end is not yet. We know the way through the chaparral now, and we will go again if life is spared us. Next time we will collect more men, and go with a hundred rancheros in the band. What do you say, men?"

There was a momentary silence, and then a bluff American answered:

"'Tain't fur me ter speak ag'in' it, but when you go I prefer ter be counted out. I've had enough o' them mud-holes. I like ranchin' better!"

His sturdy words met with a prompt echo all along the line. A furious look crossed Pedro's face.

"*Carajo!* do you show the white feather so?" he cried.

"Call it what you will," said Ben Buxton, "I don't go thar ag'in'."

"You are a coward!" shouted the hot-tempered Mexican. "No wonder we failed with such men in the party."

"Soft an' slow," Buxton coolly said. "You know ez wal ez I that ther Vultures might hev scooped in every one on us without turnin' a ha'r; we owe our lives to their mercy; an' ef I remember right, Captain Pedro, you was ez ready ez any one ter make a dive fur ther home-base."

At this Lopez lost what little calmness remained and promptly discharged Buxton from Deerfoot Ranch; a step the man met with a smile and a cheery "Thank you!" after which he moved away; but, even then, there was no one to throw up a hat and cheer for Lopez and a second attempt.

As a last resort he turned to the Texas Chick.

"I can, at least, rely on you, can't I?"

"Don't think ye kin," Zeb frankly answered.

"I've got a sup'r which, o' ther kind, will satisfy me while I hev a feather left."

"Do you refuse to go again?"

"That's ther amount on't. I ain't your employee, ye know, an' ez my own man I prefer ter remain. Our combs was cut clost ter-day, an' we're lucky ter bev a head left."

Then Pedro Lopez raised his voice and cursed until he had exhausted an abundant vocabulary, calling down dire misfortunes alike on the Texas Vultures and his own men. Common sense would have told him they were right, but he

matters had gone that day he would have given a thousand dollars to know Tiger-Lily was dead.

True, he had been told nothing he did not know before, but there was something in the face of the Vulture Queen which warned him to beware; which told that he had been spared but temporarily.

He was still raging when a man emerged from the chaparral at a point near him and then came to a halt.

It was Jarl Belvin, and his manner indicated that the encounter was as unexpected to him as it was to them, but after a brief pause, he was moving on when Lopez called to him.

The chaparral hermit paused again and looked with cold indifference as Lopez strode forward, followed by his men. Pedro knew something about Jarl's history and would have tried to put him under the sod long before, but for Abbott Woodbank.

The Mexican had always hated him. He had thought him a dangerous man, too, but he had spared him—weakly, as he now believed. And since the time when he had trouble with Moza, and was laid prostrate under Jarl's heel, he had only been waiting for a chance to kill him.

The hermit awaited the approach of the party calmly. He could not avoid seeing the hostility on the Mexican's face, but as he had a rifle and revolver and they were unarmed, it would go hard with them if violence was offered.

"See here, I want a talk with you!" Lopez belligerently said.

"I am listening," Jarl calmly replied.

"I want to know what share you had in our defeat to-day. Curse you, I begin to see you in your true light at last. This hermit business is but a pretense; you are one of the Texas Vultures. More than that, you are their spy. You have for years been giving them information, and it was your warning of our intended expedition which made them ready to receive us."

"You do not know what you are saying," Jarl said, without a ripple of excitement.

"I'll show you that I know; I'll make you howl for this!"

"Be calm!" said the hermit, icily.

"Carajo!"

"Be calm!"

"Accursed beggar—"

"Be calm!"

If there is anything in the world that maddens an angry man it is to be met by unwavering coolness, and if Pedro Lopez had been afflicted with apoplexy he would have fallen dead in his tracks.

As it was he gasped and rolled his eyes in his rage and then turned to his men.

"This fellow is Tiger-Lily's ally! Seize him, and we will hang him to the nearest tree!"

Men were there who hated Jarl Belvin, but no one who was ambitious to throw himself on the hermit's ready weapons. They hung back and Jarl smiled faintly.

"You see they are not butchers like yourself. I shall not be lynched to-day. As for being an ally of the Vultures, I am not. For the benefit of the honest rancheros, I swear it. If, when you called me, you had no business except to lynch me, I will now go."

"Go!" hissed Lopez; "but look out when we meet again!"

Jarl did not answer, but, shouldering his rifle, strode steadily away. Next the rancheros went and Zeb White was left alone.

"Ther clouds er' pilla' up in ther sky," he muttered, "an' I reckon a first-class thunder-blast will soon git under way. Ther'll be tragedy 'round hyar purty soon, I opine; an' though them ez likes that sort kin face ther music, ther Texas Chick will scud fur ther coop!"

CHAPTER XX.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

WALTER LATIMER improved much faster than any one expected. His strength had held out wonderfully, and had not the doctor given strict orders to keep him in bed, and use every effort to ward off a fever, he would not have been so much of an invalid as he was.

The wounds on his head, after being skillfully dressed, looked far less ominous than at first, and as all were back of the forehead it was safe to prophesy none of them would show when Nature had done her work.

In one way, his illness was not without a pleasant element. Constance Woodbank was his chief attendant, and she not only showed natural aptitude but extended a sympathy professional nurses cannot feel.

And Latimer was enough of a man to enjoy the sympathy of a pretty girl and, almost, to thank the chance which brought all these noble qualities to the surface.

Truly, he often thought, this daughter of Texas was a most charming creature.

But, sleeping or awake, there was always a nightmare at his pillow; a grim, ghostly specter of the past which sat like a skeleton by his bedside and tinged all his hours with somberness and an undercurrent of passion he would not have been willing Constance should know.

The ruling passion of his life had become to seek vengeance on the Vulture Queen.

Again and again he reviewed the past. First

of all she had robbed and humiliated him, and when fate placed her in his power he had yielded to her arts, and to the power of her beauty, and suffered her to go free.

Subsequent events had shown what a colossal error he made. She had deliberately exhibited the worst of perfidy, she had broken a solemn promise made to save herself from punishment; and when he had sought redress he had been stricken down and left for dead with her mocking placard on his blood-stained person.

"Compliments of Tiger-Lily, the Vulture Queen. Moral: Do not meddle with those stronger than yourself!"

He had read the words when first recovering from the murderous attack and they seemed branded on his brain with a red-hot iron. It was enough to madden him, but his resentment was that of a cool, fixed purpose. He told himself he lived only for vengeance. True, he could not shoot a woman down, as he might have done a man, but he swore to destroy her band and send her to prison.

There, she could have time to know what she had done when she made war on him.

To be deceived, over-reached, deliberately tricked by a designing, unscrupulous woman!

Never before had his pride received such a blow, and he thirsted for strength and activity as a dying man for water.

"Vengeance shall be mine!"

It was the one great thought of his life; the cry which pealed through his brain even while he talked pleasantly with Constance Woodbank.

One evening—it was the second after Lopez's expedition—she sat by his side and chatted preparatory to leaving him for the night. For the first he was to remain alone through the reign of darkness, but Moza was to be within call.

Nothing had been said to Latimer about Pedro's attempt, but, when the invalid asked if the Vulture Queen had been seen since the night of his last meeting with her, Constance acknowledged that the rancheros had made an effort, but added that they had not found the Vultures.

"And the Texas Chick?" Latimer asked.

"Went with them, but has not been seen since."

"I would like to see him here."

"I hope you are not thinking of that dreadful woman," said Miss Woodbank, taking his hand.

"How can I help it?"

"You should try. Oh! Walter, these scenes of bloodshed worry me more than I can tell. I was never made for them. Would to Heaven father had never left Virginia!"

He was surprised at her energy.

"You were young when you left there, and I did not suppose you had any fondness for the State."

"I wish I was back."

"You will have to accompany me when I return," he smilingly replied.

Her fair cheeks flushed perceptibly.

"You would regret it before we were half-way to Virginia; father says journeying with a woman is second only to being in jail."

"That's because he has never tried the right party. Now, if I had the pleasure of escorting you to the Old Dominion there would be but one drawback."

"You admit there would be one?"

"Yes. Your presence would make the journey seem so short that I should never clearly understand how I got there."

This playful conversation was of more importance than appears at first glance. It set Latimer to thinking, and it would be odd if it was not the same with Constance. When she was gone from the room, the young man meditated seriously.

He was of marriageable age and had often been told that his mansion in Virginia needed a mistress. So, that evening, he fell to imagining his fair cousin in the place. She had the beauty and tact to fill it well, and she was of an old, proud family.

Perhaps—perhaps—

He was thinking thus when realities and imaginings alike faded away and he was asleep.

When he awoke the house was silent and he believed the family had retired, but Moza was arranging his medicine on the shelf.

The half-breed girl had been his friend ever since the day of the quarrel in the *motte*, and he had come to regard her highly. It had often occurred to him that she was too intelligent for her station, and she was certainly pretty, despite her Indian blood.

Once, it will be remembered, he had suspected her of being in league with Tiger-Lily, and concerned in the midnight disturbance, but her kindness since he was wounded had caused him to abandon the idea without any clear idea why he did so.

On this occasion, having put the room in order a little, she glided out and he was again alone. A brief slumber followed, and when he again awoke it was with the impression that some one had touched his shoulder.

He looked up and saw Moza.

"Are you awake, senor?"

"Yes. Do you want me to swallow more medicine?"

"Not yet, but there is a friend wants to know if he may come in for a minute. The hour is late, but—"

"Who is it? Let him come in, by all means."

The window curtain wavered, shook, was brushed aside. Then there was a rustle of garments and Walter Latimer lay staring in speechless amazement.

Tiger Lily stood before him!

Ay, it was she; she had entered at the window, as soon as permission was given, and once more they were face to face.

The Vulture Queen was paler than usual and, being dressed in black, presented an appearance Latimer never afterward forgot. She stood motionless when once visible, one hand pressed over her heart, and with plain evidence of real or feigned agitation as she looked at the wounded man.

How long that pause would have lasted is uncertain, for Moza touched Walter's arm.

"Do not sound an alarm; she wishes to speak to you, first," the half-breed said, hurriedly.

The Virginian turned his gaze upon her, his eyes blazing fiercely, as his self-possession gradually returned, but Tiger-Lily then came quickly to his side.

"Mr. Latimer," she said, in a subdued voice, "they tell me you feel harshly toward me, and by coming here I have placed myself irrevocably in your power. One word from you will arouse the house, but before you take that step I ask your leave to make a statement."

One hand was working nervously among the fringe of the black shawl, and, in every way, she lacked the composure supposed to be part of her nature.

It was all lost on Latimer, however. As he grew more collected a fierce joy thrilled him at sight of the Vulture Queen again in his power; this time placed where no weak pity would save her.

But if she saw fit to try her arts on him again, well and good. He would delay her capture in order to show her how impervious he was to further enchantment.

"I have heard," she went on, as he nodded, "that you were found senseless and wounded with a note pinned to your coat which purported to have been written by me. It was a base forgery; I wrote no such note; I had no hand in the assault on you; and not one of my men except The Flea was absent from our quarters at the time you were wounded. I hear there were several assailants. In that case they were not members of my band; and I solemnly swear the note was a forgery."

She spoke rapidly and nervously, her fingers still working in and out among the shawl-fringe, her face far from calm.

A cold, skeptical smile crossed Latimer's face.

"Did you write the note The Honest Flea brought to me at the time he returned my watch; the note which reminded me you had kept your promise?"

"Yes, Mr. Latimer."

"Moza, bring me the box from the bureau."

The half-breed obeyed, and from it Latimer produced the note Tiger-Lily acknowledged writing and the one she denied having written, and placed them together.

"Compare the writing!" he curtly said.

She did so and then her expression changed. The writing was exactly alike in each, so far as the shape of individual letters and words were concerned.

Latimer saw her perturbation and again smiled cynically.

"You are condemned by your own act, madame. I suppose you thought these interesting slips of paper were destroyed before now, but you see they still exist. And, my outlaw queen, when your own hand-writing condemns you, you may well abandon falsehood and acknowledge your guilt!"

CHAPTER XXI.

AN INEXORABLE JUDGE.

THE Virginian spoke with extreme harshness, and as his gaze unwaveringly searched her face, her agitation was but food and drink for the spirit of resentment and revenge within him.

Tiger-Lily did not answer at once. She was looking earnestly at the two notes, but she finally lifted her head.

"I did write both," she said, "but the one found by you after you were struck down was written long ago; so long ago that I cannot remember when. Look at it carefully and you will see the writing has faded a little. It was clearly written after some of our raids, but when I do not remember. But to one thing I will swear: It does not in any way apply to you, nor was it left near you by me or any of my men."

"Do you expect me to believe this story?"

"Heaven help me, I do not know!"

She spoke tremulously, but his face did not soften.

"I believed you once before when you spoke in defiance of reason and common-sense, fool that I was, I believed you; but you cannot dupe me again."

"Mr. Latimer, I have no desire to dupe you,

nor can I hope any honorable person will believe me; but I have come here to night resolved to make a statement to you, let the consequences be what they may."

She spoke more firmly, as though wounded pride was arising within her.

"Go on!" he said, briefly.

"You think I am all evil, but you shall know the truth. When you spared me the night I was at this house before I promised to return your watch and money. No promise was ever more sincerely made; none more faithfully kept; though I can see now I erred fatally. I should have brought your property myself, instead of trusting anything to The Flea. He is an arrant knave, I confess, but he had always been faithful and, apparently, devoted, to me, and I selected him for my messenger. He went, returned and reported his work honestly done and I did not doubt him.

"After that I rested easily until the horrible news came that you were lying here badly wounded, and that the work had been done by Tiger-Lily and her men at an hour corresponding to that at which my man met you and delivered over the money. I sent for The Flea and, after a good deal of trouble, secured a confession. He acknowledged stealing back your watch after giving it to you, and said you had pursued him when you learned your loss.

"He ran to the edge of the chaparral and then turned sharply to the left, but he declared that when you entered the bushes you fell down the back and was then set upon by men to him unknown, and he judged by the sound of blows they were killing you. He became frightened and, creeping away, hastened back to the chaparral; but he kept the truth to himself until I compelled him to talk."

"You claim to be ignorant of the source of the attack?"

"I will swear that I am."

"Do not swear," he said, putting out his hand, quickly. "Bad as you are, I would not see you commit perjury."

A red flush leaped to her face and then faded away, leaving it deathly pale, but she did not speak.

"Once," he resumed, relentlessly, "I trusted you; I believed your word. I shall not err thus again. You have used me for your sport; you have dealt me an assassin's blow. Do you fancy I am of such poor, weak, miserable clay as to be forever led by the nose?"

Moza, the half-blood, swept forward impatiently, strong indignation marked on her face.

"Sir!" she cried, "you are unjust and—"

"Moza!" interrupted Tiger-Lily.

"I will speak!" declared the girl. "Mr. Latimer, by introducing the Queen here to-night I have shown you that I am her friend and her ally. A word from you can ruin me. Do you suppose I would take this risk if she was as false as you assert?"

Latimer looked from one to the other of the young women, both beautiful in their way, but his calmness did not desert him.

"What bond is between you two?" he slowly asked.

"The bond of humanity. I know her to be a persecuted, unhappy woman—"

"Enough, Moza; I have no quarrel with you. Let your friend speak for herself."

A look from Tiger-Lily seconded the direction and the half-blood girl went aside, though her look was rebellious.

"I have come to return your watch," said the Vulture Queen, abruptly; and then the cause of so much trouble was placed in his hands.

"Is there any charm to bind it to my presence?" he sarcastically asked.

"While in Texas, it would be well to keep it out of sight and carry a bowie-knife instead."

"I begin to believe it. But, Tiger-Lily, have I heard all? Is the object of your visit fully explained?"

"You know all. When I heard of your injury and forced The Flea to tell the truth, and to surrender the watch, I knew what you must think of me and resolved to come here and tell the truth, and deliver the watch in person, let the result be what it might. I am now here, and it is in your power to prevent my return."

"Yes," he said, "I have but to call—Hullo!"

Moza sprang forward again, her face pale and agitated.

"Senor!" she exclaimed; "*Madre de Dios!* what would you do?"

"I said I had but to call—Hullo!"

"Not so loud; for the Virgin's sake, not so loud!"

"Moza, say no more," said Tiger-Lily, firmly. "We have taken the risk and must abide by it."

"I did not do it willingly," said the half-blood, rebelliously. "You overruled my better judgment."

"Woman," interrupted Latimer, addressing the Vulture Queen, "why do you stand there inactively? Do you not know every moment is precious to you? Why do you not flee while you can?"

"Moza is my friend," she steadily answered, "and if you are going to give an alarm I will not leave her to face danger alone."

The Virginian put his hand blindly to his

forehead. The case was beginning to assume a shape and depth which he could not understand or grasp.

"Didn't you think of all this before you came?" he irritably asked.

"I did."

"Then, in Heaven's name, why did you come?"

"To assert my innocence: to explain away, if I could, what looked so dark and terrible. I have done that, Mr. Latimer, and I am now at your mercy. I shall make no plea except to ask you one question: Would I have come here to-night if I had been guilty?"

For the first time the Vulture Queen showed signs of the pride which had marked her career at the head of her men. She drew her magnificent form fully erect and the nobility of her face and carriage staggered Latimer.

What was he to think of this remarkable woman? So far as substantial facts went, there seemed ample evidence to convict or acquit her, and when both sides had a hearing the confusion became bewildering.

And when the Virginian declared to himself it was madness to think well of her—of Tiger-Lily, the Vulture Queen—the subtle magnetism of her presence wooed him away from logic, and probability, and everything that was practical.

While she awaited his verdict there was dead silence in the room. Whether she was innocent or guilty, she was sparing him the trouble of meeting woman's weapons—pleadings and tears.

He was still wavering when an idea shot like a flash into his mind and, having a being, ruled the hour.

He lowered his hands.

"On one condition, I will say: 'Go in peace; I believe you; we are not enemies.'"

A gleam of joy, too intense to be hidden, shot to Tiger-Lily's face and eyes, and Walter Latimer had never seen her look so lovely before.

"And that?" she questioned.

"If I spare you now there must be no half-way work," he went on, reckless of consequences. "I must either be your enemy or your friend. If it is to be the latter, I must insist on the privilege of visiting the quarters of your band, and of going and coming whenever I choose, at any reasonable hour. One word before you answer me. I claim to be an honorable man, and as such I swear not to betray the secrets of your refuge, while, so far as you and I are concerned, I will conduct myself toward you with the same respect I would to the highest lady in the land!"

A mad leap he had made, metaphorically speaking, going from wild thoughts of revenge to equally wild thoughts of friendship, but he believed no man since Solomon has been really wise.

Thus it was that Latimer, the youngest of a proud old Virginia family, awaited with anxiety for a reply, hoping it would be favorable, from from the Texan queen of outlaws.

CHAPTER XXII.

JARL BELVIN ON THE TRAIL.

TIGER-LILY did not answer at once and it was plain she was being guided more by reason than impulse. She finally raised her gaze to Latimer's face.

"Have you given this matter serious thought?" she asked, gravely.

"Yes," he answered, as promptly as though the idea had not first occurred to him three minutes before.

"Remember that I am an outlaw and my men of the same kind, and that by associating with us you lay yourself liable to serious trouble."

"I am willing to risk all that."

"You are rash to do so merely for novelty and adventure."

"It is not merely for novelty and adventure. Do you suppose I would go among outlawed people if you were not there?"

He could not help the question, and, wisely or not, he spoke with sincerity. A deep flush dyed the face of the Vulture Queen.

"Beware!" she said, tremulously.

"Of what, of whom?"

"Remember who I am; a branded outlaw, a—"

"Enough! I know all that, but I am willing to risk my future on the cast of the die, if so it is to be. Our acquaintance has been a strange one, and I am resolved to prove you good or bad, as the fact may be."

"Have you heard it said that I am the sworn enemy of Abbott Woodbank, your uncle?"

"Yes; I know of the enmity; but, so far as the relationship goes, it is but nominal. My father's second wife was Woodbank's sister; the master of Deerfoot and I are, really, not in the least related. On that score be at ease. But, Queen Lily, what is this mysterious enmity between you?"

"I cannot tell you now. Some time, perhaps, you shall know, but not now. I would not speak against your host, but if you knew all you would say there was ample cause for all my enmity."

Latimer was wise enough to accept this decision gracefully, and the freshly-established

peace between them was cemented by the touch of their hands. Then Tiger-Lily announced that she must go and his words failed to shake her decision. She confessed that Moza, though not in any way connected with the Vultures, was her loyal ally, and through her any message could be sent which the Virginian desired.

The time of his visit to the chaparral was to be as soon as he was really in condition for the journey, and he declared that the anticipation of it would prove the best recuperative he could have.

Then the Vulture Queen went away as silently as she had come, and Moza, after assuring the invalid he had done wisely, went to the adjoining room.

Walter Latimer was again alone.

After impulsive action comes mature meditation, and he was left to wonder if he had done wisely. A few hours before he had been thirsting for revenge on the girl outlaw, and planning how he could bring her to ruin; now, without more proof than her word, the word of an outlaw, he had allowed himself to be convinced of her innocence of wrong-doing and, desiring to be her friend, had impetuously urged his cause.

The case furnishes ground for abundant moralizing, but we will dismiss it with the recollection that while the world moves and men and women have a being, they will do mad, unreasonable things and lay up food for weal or woe in the future as the turn of fate's tide may leave them.

Yet, the reader will readily believe Walter Latimer's mind was not wholly at ease; gloomy forebodings wrestled with stubborn resolution, even as they would do until he knew Tiger-Lily better.

Moza had gone to her room, but she had not been there a great while when a tapping at her window arrested her attention. She brushed aside the curtain and saw the face of Jarl Belvin; then raised the sash and stepped to his side—all the windows of the house being nearly on a level with the piazza.

"You here?" she exclaimed. "Why will you be so rash, just after the mysterious robbery? Some one may be watching."

"Am I more rash than Tiger-Lily?" the hermit asked, his firm face unchanged.

"You know—"

"That she has been here to see Latimer. How did they part?"

"As friends. He believes she had nothing to do with the assault."

"Poor fool!"

"Sir!"

"Put on no airs with me," said Jarl, sturdily. "She may have blinded you and, his young man, who is more than half in love with her, but she cannot deceive me. I know she had a hand in the attempted murder. On the evening of the tragedy, I had business which took me away from my cabin. I made all my preparations and started, but only a few rods had been passed when I heard men approaching me in the underbrush. I paused for them to pass, and stood screened by a thicket. When near me, the nearest man paused to light his pipe. The match blazed up, and I distinctly recognized the face of Captain Scorpion. Tiger-Lily's second in command. He dropped the match, and as he did so, struck his hand against a thorn. He cursed roundly, and then added that Tiger-Lily ought to pay them well for the job. A second man observed that they might fail, but Scorpion replied that he had no fear; their plans were so well laid that Latimer would surely fall into the ambush. After that they went on. I thought of seeking Latimer, but my business was important, and I went my own way. The next day I heard of the assault. Draw your own conclusions."

"I don't believe it!" declared Moza, stamping her foot.

"What?"

"That Tiger-Lily is so bad as that. I won't believe it. They acted without her knowledge."

"She told me all of her men except The Flea were at the cave that night. Do you suppose the whole band could go out and she remain ignorant of the fact? Rest assured, she was not ignorant!"

"I don't believe it! I won't believe it! Your eyes deceived you. There is some mistake—"

"We will let the matter drop, for I care nothing about it, anyway," Jarl calmly said.

"Moza, I want you to admit me to the cellar."

"To the cellar?"

"Yes."

"For what purpose?"

"You shall know that anon. I have an idea, and want to test it. Perhaps the test will put an end to this long-protracted struggle. For years I have waited against the voice of my better judgment to carry out the oath I swore that horrible night on the southern prairie. I have delayed and let the guilty live—why? Because of a fancy, a freak, a mistaken charity, or whatever you see fit to call it. I will wait no longer. Down under the Bleak plain Neal Belvin lies, but he does not rest. From the grave he cries aloud for vengeance. And I—I, Jarl Belvin, who swore a solemn oath over his

body, am here in inactivity. I will wait no longer; I will strike with a heavy hand and crush Woodbank and Lopez, let others delay as they will. You hear, girl, but you need not reply. My resolution is immovable!"

The hermit spoke with a subdued intensity which frigatened the girl, and, beset by conflicting emotions, she could not command her voice.

A brief silence followed and then Jarl authoritatively added:

"Lead the way to the cellar."

She opposed him no further, and, as they were not likely to be overheard, obeyed.

Once there he dismissed her and was alone in the place.

It was one of Woodbank's fancies to have what he considered a model cellar, and this one was roomy and well-constructed. The floor was one of cement and the walls of stone quarried from the hills north of Thornpath Chaparral. Nearly all the latter were of regular shape, forming squares around the whole cellar.

As soon as Moza was gone, Jarl walked to the northern side and began surveying the wall critically. If he expected to find a door, or opening of any kind, he was disappointed, and then he went further and laid hold of block after block.

These were chinked with some sort of mortar and all appeared to be firm.

Jarl's lantern showed a thoughtful frown on his face. Matters were not progressing as he had hoped, though he was not surprised. Yet his confidence did not for a moment waver; he seemed rather to be mentally seeking for the clew to a mystery.

He ended by taking a hammer, with which he proceeded to sound each block in succession. Of course his blow had to be a light one, for if he was detected in the cellar he could not hope for mercy, but he seemed content with the way matters were working.

Finally he paused abruptly and sounded a certain block a second, and even a third time. After this he went further and was busy for ten minutes. At the end of that time he discovered a round spot on one block, which, when touched, proved to be an iron bolt with one end extending toward him.

Pressure revealed the fact that it was movable, and he shoved it back until, suddenly, a section of the wall swung toward him and an opening like a door was left, with a dark passage beyond.

The hermit smiled grimly. The wall was a cunning sham; a door was set in it and the fact concealed by a thin layer of stone and other artifices. With his suspicions aroused he had discovered the trick, but a stranger might have occupied the house for years and never suspected the wall was anything more than it seemed.

Jarl hid the light of his bull's eye and passed through the opening, closing the door behind him and fastening it with the bolt before mentioned.

He was then fairly off on his venture, and no one knew better than he that it was likely to be a dangerous one. That night, when prowling near the house, he had discovered that strange sounds arose faintly from the ground, and he had drawn his own inferences and started to test their accuracy.

In any case he was investigating what, since there were reasons for concealing it, must be a thing outsiders could not meddle with safely.

But Jarl was a man to whom fear was unknown, and he felt for his weapons and then advanced softly and silently with every sense on the alert to catch the slightest sound of danger.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE SECRET OF DEERFOOT RANCH.

JARL BELVIN was a powerful and heavy man, but he moved along the passage with almost cat-like caution and silence. The way was narrow; he could touch the walls on both sides at the same time, but the footing was good and he went on steadily.

As he advanced, the silence at the front was suddenly broken and he heard the same sound which had first aroused his suspicions. This time it was more distinct, though far from being loud enough to naturally betray whatever secret it held connection with in this underground place.

The hermit went on until his hand encountered a door in front. This proved to be unfastened, and when he pulled it open, light shone dimly through what seemed a curtain.

It proved to be a blanket, and pulling it aside, a strange scene was revealed to his gaze.

A subterranean room of considerable size, the walls of stone, and the roof a sort of thatch-work supported by wooden pillars; men scattered here and there working with various tools and at various instruments, their labors lighted by small lamps; in brief, all the minutiae of a work shop.

Such was the scene Jarl Belvin saw, and one which might have puzzled him had he not previously decided what to expect. Added to this was the fact that he had once been in a Government mint, and looking on the workmen, he knew they were making money.

A grim smile crossed the hermit's face. At

least he had the means of ruining those he hated. There had long been stories of counterfeiters in that part of Texas—we have seen that the Texas Chick suspected the Vultures—but Jarl had not thought of placing the blame where it belonged.

At last, however, he knew the truth. The master of Deerfoot Ranch, proud, aristocratic, wealthy and reputed strictly honorable, was at the head of the counterfeiters. There could be no doubt about it, since the work was done in a cellar adjoining that of his own house.

Jarl's gaze wandered further to where a man seemed acting the part of a foreman.

There he made a fresh discovery.

The foreman was Pedro Lopez!

Jarl's lips parted in a hard, triumphant cruel smile. At last he had the means of vengeance in his hands and he was not the man to abate one jot or tittle of his triumph. Death he considered too feeble a punishment for Woodbank, though it was fit for Lopez; but the proud ranch-owner should have the dubious pleasure of serving his time for a crime in which the United States Government was interested.

"The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding fine," he muttered. "Who would have thought that the man who murdered Neal Belvin would himself put into my hands the means of retribution!"

His calm face was drawn out of place by a tiger-like expression and his eyes blazed as he looked at Lopez.

Woe be unto the Mexican when the avenger struck in his wrath!

For half an hour the hermit watched. He tried to discover what base metal was used as a filling for the thin coating of gold and silver, but nothing was certain except the fact that the counterfeiting was in progress.

He was still watching when he heard a jar behind him. He dropped the blanket and wheeled quickly. The sound was one he was not at a loss to understand: the secret door had been closed by some one with such force as to produce an echo.

Jarl stood like a tiger at bay until he saw a light at the other end of the passage. Then the truth flashed upon him. Some one was about to enter the secret work-room and he, the spy, was between two parties.

He could not hide in the passage; he had noted all that before; it was barely large enough for travel; and the fact became clear that he must either remain there and idly meet discovery or enter the counterfeiters' den.

During a long life of adventure he had learned to take chances with steady nerves, but here was a little more of the kind than he thirsted for. True, he might have remained and tried his luck at silencing the new-comer, but that meant discovery sooner or later anyway.

He took one look inside the main room and made his decision quickly. An empty dry-goods case lay just at one side of the door, and if he could gain that he had a respite, if nothing more.

No time was to be lost.

Pushing aside the blanket he dodged through and behind the box like a flash. It was touch-and-go, at the best, for if any workman chanced to observe him he stood a poor chance of pulling through alive.

He felt all the torture of suspense for a moment, but when he had wormed his way into the box and peered through a huge knot-hole, he saw work going on steadily and he knew he had escaped for the time.

He was, however, a good deal like a caged tiger.

Using his eyes and ears, he noted the time when the unknown emerged from the passage and then took a look at him. The result did not surprise him. The new-comer was Abbott Woodbank.

His entrance was speedily known to all, and the air of the workmen indicated that their superior had arrived.

Lopez came forward quickly.

"What! are you here, senior? I did not think to see you at this hour."

"Why shouldn't I be here?" Woodbank peevishly asked.

"There's no reason, but you usually prefer to sleep."

"Devils alive! don't I prefer it now? Ay, I'd give half my fortune if I could sleep as I did once. But I can't; I lay and toss like an egg shell on the ocean; toss and think. But if I sleep, it's all the same. Lopez, I am a haunted man!"

Woodbank spoke with an odd mixture of trembling fear and forced defiance, but the laugh with which he wound up his remarks was anything but natural or musical.

"What haunts you?" the Mexican asked.

"What should haunt me? It's my sins!"

"Nonsense! Such things never trouble me—"

"I know it too well. You have a conscience made of flint. You are a Herod, a Nero, a Pontius Pilate, all combined!"

"Caramba! I never suspected it," said Lopez, showing his white teeth in a smile. "But, come, senior; let us sit down on this box and talk."

The overseer drew his companion to the case within which Jarl Belvin was hiding. This did not interfere with Jarl and would give him a fine chance to listen, but if one of them chanced to look inside it would go hard with the spy.

"You are not in your usual spirits, to-night, senior," said Pedro, in the purring voice he could assume when he tried.

"I am in the spirits which have become 'usual' to me of late. Events have taken a turn to set me a-thinking, and I begin to regret the past. That old-time robbery and the wagon-train massacre—Ugh! it makes my blood chill! Then here are Tiger-Lily and that accursed Belvin. Why do they hang about Deerfoot Ranch? What object can they have but to get revenge? I never go to sleep, now, without expecting to awake with a knife at my throat; I never dream unless something of the sort occurs. To-night, I dreamed I saw Jarl Belvin enter the cellar, and when I went there he took me by the throat and strangled me. The dream awoke me."

"And is that all?"

"All? Isn't it enough? Good God! is mortal fear and growing repentance to be classed as nothing?"

"Pardon, senior, but you are merely nervous. As for repentance, I believe people never repent except when they are found out or expect to be."

"Devil! you will never repent, anyway!"

"Probably not," replied Pedro, with his disagreeable smile. "Repentance is another name for mental weakness. But, look ye, senior, am I not menaced by the same perils? I am, and now I'll tell you how I shall meet them. Comrade, the day of inactivity is past. Jarl Belvin and the Vulture Queen are dangerous, as you say. Well, shall we sit idly and let them work their vengeance? Caramba! that is not my way!"

"What can we do?" Woodbank feebly asked.

"Put them out of the way. I have a plan already laid for Jarl, and one for Tiger-Lily will not be long wanting. We will sweep them both from our path."

"Can't the girl be spared?"

"No! Death alone will make her harmless. But, hear how I am going to finish off the hermit. It's a wonder I have spared him so long, but you urged it so strongly I consented. But I have had my eyes upon him and one of his ways lingers in my memory. As you know, he is a good deal away from his cabin. Well, when he returns he always enters his cabin, puts down his rifle and comes out with a bucket in which he dips water from the spring for his use. Do you see my plan?"

"No."

"Behold! I put a trusty man in the bushes to watch for his return, and at sight of him this man throws poison in the spring. Result: Jarl drinks and dies!"

This diabolical plan was unfolded without a cessation of the old, villainous smile, but Woodbank started up.

"No, no!" he cried. "Not that! not that! I will not listen to it!"

Lopez forced him back on the box.

"You shall listen!" he said, imperiously. "This sentimental business has gone far enough. You were not so tender-hearted when you wanted the girl's fortune. Caramba! let nonsense cease; Jarl Belvin dies!"

"But not by poison—"

"I say, yes! We can explain that he died in a fit. Have done with nonsense. Oppose me in this, Senior Woodbank, and I swear all the world shall know who makes bogus money in Texas!"

He waved his hand around the room, and Woodbank's head dropped upon his breast. His newly-awakened conscience was powerless before the strength of the Mexican's will.

A brief silence followed, and Lopez watched his companion, a smile curling his pitiless lips. He was master of Deerfoot Ranch in more senses than one, and he did not hesitate to show the iron hand to the man who held the nominal honor in the world's sight.

Just then, however, a small dog belonging to the counterfeiters ran behind the case on which they sat, and raised a yelp which made Pedro turn. He looked and saw a man in the box.

Before he could fully comprehend the situation, however, Jarl leaped to his feet, and seizing Woodbank, planted him before him as a shield, and thrust a revolver over each shoulder, with the muzzles covering Pedro, and one terse command:

"Stand where you are, or you're a dead man!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

JARL FACES THE COUNTERFEITERS.

ALL this had occurred with such a rush, that cool-headed as Pedro was, he stood dazed and motionless, and might have been riddled with bullets before he could have made a counter-hostile movement.

Jarl, however, did not fire, and things could not have been quieter around there for a little while if all the men had been turned to stone.

Even the small dog, after unearthing his game, was looking to his master for orders.

The hermit had taken the only stand open to him. Lopez was between him and the passage, and if he started to run he would undoubtedly get more than one bullet in his back. It was just as well to play a bold game and trust to luck.

Woodbank, having been converted into an extemporaneous breastwork, stood quaking in Jarl's arms, but the two hands which almost touched his cheeks as Jarl held out the revolvers did not waver in the least.

"If you want to use your life after to-night, Pedro Lopez, you'll be wise enough to stand where you are," the hermit coolly announced.

Consternation was expressed on Pedro's face. He was frightened to know that his enemy held so important a secret, and trouble began to loom up in the near future. But the last words broke the spell.

"Guard every point of escape, men—" began the Mexican, sharply; but he was interrupted.

"Not a movement!" ordered Jarl, in a deep and terrible voice. "Pedro Lopez, I hold you accountable for your men. If one tries to get nearer the passage than he is, I'll put a bullet through you. Bear this in mind and look out for yourself!"

"*Carajo!* If you fire you're a dead man!" snarled Pedro.

"Perhaps I am, but you won't live to see me die. If blood is shed, you go under first of all, my fine cut-throat!"

The Mexican stood in silent but towering rage. It was bad enough to be worsted, but when things came to the point that a single man could walk into their den and rule the place, it was beyond endurance.

Yet, the fact remained that the intruder could not be shot without making a martyr of Woodbank, while if Pedro essayed any hostility Jarl could riddle him at his leisure.

So Lopez began to curse loudly, as the only vent for his impotent wrath.

"Not so loud!" said Jarl, with evident enjoyment of the scene. "Some one might hear you and suspect Woodbank and his model overseer were making bogus money."

"*Mil demonios!* do you hear him?" cried Pedro. "Step aside, Woodbank, and let the men at him!"

"I dare not!" muttered the ranch-owner, pale as death.

"He speaks the truth," added Jarl. "In the first place he can't 'step aside,' and in the next it would besure death for him if he tried. You see, Pedro Lopez, I am master here and I intend to remain so."

Master he surely was, for the time, but the question of remaining so was another matter. The counterfeiters, whom Jarl had by that time recognized as putative Mexican rancheros employed by Woodbank, had left their work and formed a scowling outside circle. They had the will to kill the intruder, being always ready to follow Pedro and, on the present occasion, aware that desperate danger was near, and it would be rare judgment that took him clear of seven resolute men.

Yet, he was the coolest man in the counterfeiters' den.

"So you think of poisoning me, Pedro Lopez," he resumed, as they seemed to have nothing to say. "I am glad you make your plans public, for now I know the way you are going to work I will meet you with your own weapons. We will see who wins!"

"So we will!" said the Mexican, wolfishly. "You shall see sooner than you expect. Ha! ha! perhaps you can stand there and hold the old man all night, but I doubt it. If you can, why we shall be compelled to starve you out; that's all!"

"We shall see," Jarl coolly replied, and as he spoke he pushed Woodbank gently toward the passage, a movement which obliged the old man to step once and took him so much nearer the point of safety.

Pedro saw the danger at once.

"*Carajo!* do not go thus, Woodbank," he implored. "Hold back—resist! Will you see our plans ruined?"

"What can I do?" asked the ranch-owner, with more spirit. "You are the man who was going to do such wonderful things. Now, go ahead and do them!"

"Yes," said Jarl, mockingly; "now is the time to show your valor, Pedro Lopez. What are you going to do?"

The Mexican had the will to do something desperate, but he did not clearly see how it was to be done.

"Woodbank!" he cried wildly, "why in the fiend's name can't you seize his hands? Then I would rush in and make an end of him."

"Woodbank is too wise for that," Jarl quickly said. "If he lays a hand on me, he is a dead man. I give you all fair warning. Make way, Pedro Lopez!"

He had pushed the elder man further yet, and was nearing the passage. His work was by no means easy; he had to have a wary watch all around him, and at the same time keep his body so protected by his prisoner's that no one could get in a snap-shot.

Lopez was not a fool, and he saw that he must yield unless Jarl by some chance left an opening. For that opening the fellow watched with hungry eyes.

As the hermit advanced, Pedro fell back. Neither removed his gaze from the other. Jarl knew his person was protected by his prisoner's form, and he gave no attention to the other men. All danger lay with Lopez.

Foot by foot the men swung around like a military squad in motion, but silent as the grave. Neither spoke; neither moved, except as was necessary. But Pedro's eyes blazed with a fire which told of intense fury, and it was well for Jarl the chances were not against him.

Pedro receded until he had left an open road, and then paused and folded his arms. The hermit never forgot the look that was on his face then. It told of an amount of hatred which those of a colder nature cannot well understand.

But Jarl was not a man to be thus frightened. He worked his prisoner around until their backs were to the passage, and then halted.

"I am going away peaceably, if you will let me," he said in his strong, even way; "but if you force trouble, you shall have all you desire. I dare say Abbott Woodbank prefers peace, though; for I shall use him as a shield until I am safe. Speak, sir!"

"I will," said Woodbank. "I have been a puppet in this game long enough. Now, hear me, men! I am not going to have my brains blown out for a trifle. Jarl Belvin has secured the mastery here and he must go in peace. Let him have his own way."

"Pedro Lopez smiles mockingly," said Jarl.

"Let him smile!" retorted Woodbank. "Perhaps I shall see him in trouble some day."

"You'll never see me take water," said Pedro, shrilly. "A thousand curses on such cowardice!"

"Ha! what do you want, my bold Pedro?" Jarl demanded. "If you are not satisfied, begin the fighting; only, remember I fire at your first move."

"Have your own way," sullenly replied the Mexican, and then he turned and strode to the further side of the room.

Belvin swung around and slowly made his way past the blanket, pulling his prisoner after him and all the while watching the counterfeiters. There was no interruption from any of them, for they moved only when Lopez ordered.

But as the blanket fell behind the daring intruder, Lopez spoke to his nearest man without turning his head.

"Pablo, you are cunning and brave. I will give you a hundred dollars if Jarl Belvin is found dead to-morrow morning, in his cabin or by the trail."

"Senor," the man replied, "it is not right he should live. I will win the money if I can."

Observing as the hermit was he failed to notice this by-play, and, indeed, there was little to betray them. But Pedro had put a human bloodhound on Jarl's trail.

The latter backed steadily out of the den, taking Woodbank with him. The blanket fell in place again, but the only change in Jarl's tactics was to increase his pace; he did not intend to give the counterfeiters a chance at him by any injudicious movement.

"Be at your ease," he said, to his prisoner. "I have no intention of harming you—now!"

There was a significance about the last word Woodbank could not overlook if he would.

From the passage they retreated to the cellar and then Jarl threw off a measure of his extreme caution.

"Lead the way to the outer air," he said, releasing his prisoner.

Woodbank did not think of disobeying. He had a perfect horror of the hermit and knew that in his hands he would be a child. The easiest way out of the present difficulty was the best; he had no disposition to force hostilities.

So he led the way through the silent house and ushered the unwelcome visitor out. There was nothing in their manner to tell of their deep enmity, but no hypocritical words were wasted. The silence was not broken until Jarl stood outside the door. Then he turned to the ranch-owner.

"You and I are beginning to understand each other better, Abbott Woodbank," he quietly said, "but if you expect a thunder-bolt to fall on your head at once you are mistaken. I want time to think. This will give you a chance to play your cards for my life."

"I don't want your life!" Woodbank hurriedly answered.

"Enough! We won't argue the question, but I think we know each other. Our acquaintance began the day you had me flogged because I accused you of being instrumental in the death of my son, Neal. I am a man who never forgets. Bear that in mind, Abbott Woodbank. Good-night!"

Jarl turned abruptly and strode away. If Woodbank had held a revolver in his hand then he would not have had the nerve to use it. He was wholly unmanned.

A light footstep sounded at his side. He

turned and saw Pablo. The man peered sharply into the darkness.

"Where are you going?" Woodbank asked.

"Out—on Senor Lopez's errand!"

Woodbank needed no further explanation and he leaned against the wall, weak and confused, while Pablo disappeared in the darkness. The human bloodhound was on Jarl's trail.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE MAN AT THE DOOR.

JARL BELVIN lost no time by the way but went at once to his cabin in the wood. On the way his mind had been deeply busy, but this did not prevent him from keeping a sharp watch for danger. He expected Lopez to send assassins on his trail and guarded against it, but none appeared.

Soon after his arrival at the cabin he lay down and went to sleep as peacefully as a child. It seemed a rash thing to do, but he had slept thus, knowing Pedro Lopez thirsted for his life, for months.

To be brief, the chaparral hermit knew what he was about and an enemy would have found it hard to enter the place unknown to him.

The night passed peacefully. In the morning Jarl arose, opened the door of his cabin and took a wary look around. The wood was not thick at that point and the sunshine fell through the trees and touched the ground at his feet. The scene was calm and placid, and the keen eyes of the hermit failed to detect any sign of an ambushed foe.

He stepped outside and then suddenly paused.

At one side of the door lay the body of a man—nothing more; for life had left the tenement of clay. He lay upon his back and the position was tolerably composed, but his wide-open eyes looked upward with a stare which was out of keeping with the placid day.

His face was not a strange one to Jarl. He recognized him as one of Woodbank's rancheros, Pablo by name, and remembered having seen him in the counterfeiters' den.

As he lay there an ugly-looking knife was still clasped in his death-stiffened hand, but the blade was unsullied by a drop of blood. Yet, there was a gash in his garments near the heart and a red pool discolored the leaves by his side.

Jarl bent over him and found that some strong hand had driven a knife home with great force. Beyond a doubt the man had died without any clear knowledge of what had stricken him.

The hermit stood for several seconds gazing at the body. There was a mystery about the case he could not solve. He had more than half-expected to see one of Pedro Lopez's assassins around his home, and the naked knife spoke a language none the less vivid because it was mute.

But how had Pablo died? Whose hand had arrested him in the midst of his murderous attempt, and dealt a counter-blow which had ended Pablo's work and life at one and the same time?

Jarl looked for the trail of the unknown, but failed to find anything definite. There were signs of a slight struggle, but the victor had left no clew which would lead to the discovery of his identity.

He was still considering the question, when a crackling of the bushes near at hand was followed by the appearance of the Texas Chick. The manner of the man was as buoyant as usual, and his face shone with good-humor, where it could struggle through its coating of dirt.

At first sight of Jarl he hesitated for a moment and then came forward with a good-humored nod.

"Didn't expect ter see anybody else up an' at it so 'arly ez this, but ther 'arly bird gets ther worm an' we— Hallo!"

Zeb broke off suddenly as he saw the dead man and then more soberly added:

"Wal, you *her* been at it an' no discount, an' you've got the worm, too."

"This is no work of mine," the hermit curtly said, for he had little friendship for the unwashed Chick.

"No? Wal, he's harvested mighty nigh your shantv."

"You see the man as I found him ten minutes ago. He is stiff and cold and I know nothing about him. Can you say as much?"

Jarl looked keenly at the Chick, but with less of suspicion than the question indicated; and the way in which it was received was enough to dissipate any idea that Zeb had a hand in the premature taking-off of the Mexican.

"Ef you mean ez ter bow he died, I should say lightnin' hit him in ther back, but I didn't see it did an' can't answer regular. Ez fur who he is, or was, I've see'd him on ther ranch over vender. He was one o' Lopez's pet roosters, but his comb is now cut close."

Jarl had been thinking while he talked and saw a necessity of taking Zeb into his confidence in a degree, since he had stumbled on a part of the secret. He therefore related how he had found the man, but made no mention of the encounter in the counterfeiters' den.

After a little more conversation, it was

agreed to bury the corpse secretly, and they bore it to the slope of the bank, hollowed out a shallow grave and left it under the chaparral trees, there to lie until other than mortal means resurrected it.

The Texas Chick showed a curiosity which annoyed Jarl, but which he felt compelled to satisfy in part, and when the former referred to the well-known trouble between the hermit and Woodbank, Jarl was obliged to confess there might be ground for the theory that Pablo had been sent by his superiors.

"Be that as it may, he now disappears from human sight, and only you and I hold the key to the mystery. I think it is also time for me to disappear, and those who come here after this will find the cabin silent and deserted. Come; let us go before we have other visitors."

"Whar shall you make yer quarters, now?" Zeb asked, as they went away.

"In the chaparral. There is room there for the wolf and tiger; why not for me?"

"But you'll build a new cabin?"

"No."

Jarl spoke curtly and the Texas Chick let the subject drop, but he fell into thought and only aroused when he had a new question.

"Pard, you're a man what's b'en around a good 'eal, an' I reckon you keep yer eyes open. What's yer theory about ther mysterious counterfeitin' business?"

"I have no theory," Jarl replied, with increasing severity.

"Wal, you needn't chop my head off, ef you ain't. Let me explain: I'm still-huntin' them critters an' hankerin' fur ther reward; ev'ry feather on my carcass is on ther banker. Now, honest Injun, ain't you seed signs by ther way?"

Jarl stopped and grounded his rifle with a bang; then, looking harshly into the Chick's dirt-begrimed face, he answered in his most ominous voice:

"Don't come to me for information. I know nothing about the counterfeiters, and care nothing about them. All I desire is to be let alone. You can carry out whatever plans you have in your own way, but don't come to me for points. Attend to your own business and let me attend to mine."

His burst of wrath did not seem to frighten Zeb, but he accepted the verdict philosophically.

"Jest ez you say, but I'd like a pardner 'bout o' your caliber. I like ther way you crow. But from that same pint, I argue, you'd like me ter go my own way. So be it; I'm off. Take care o' yourself, fur you may see more assassins like ther first. Good-day!"

The Texas Chick waved a good-natured farewell, wheeled and disappeared in the bushes.

Jarl looked relieved, but wandered on slowly as before. He was not so indifferent as he seemed, for he had work to do, but he wished to be sure his late companion was not following him. When this point seemed settled, he quickened his pace and turned into the thickest of the undergrowth; but he had been over the ground before, and soon striking a regular path, which was well hidden by bushes from a casual observer's notice, he walked on at a rapid stride.

In due time he reached the ridge where the Texas Vultures were said to live, and following a way well known to him, was soon before one of the guards.

His face was always a passport, and he did not pause until he was in the presence of the Vulture Queen.

The latter had a private room, which possessed more of the comforts of life than one would expect to see, and there she passed her time when not out on the trail. A robust-looking woman of middle age was in the room when the hermit entered, but she seemed to understand she was no longer wanted, and went out quietly.

"Welcome, Jarl," said Tiger-Lily, kindly; but she knew the man's ways too well to say or do more.

Even with her he was always curt and morose.

"I have something of importance to say."

Tiger-Lily's gaze wavered. She expected to hear herself rebuked for visiting Latimer.

"What is it?"

"Our foes are at last in our power. You know all the talk about counterfeiters 'in Texas'."

"Yes."

"The work is done near Woodbank's house and by men employed by him. They are ostensibly rancheros, but it seems that part of the scheme is but a farce. They work by night on the spurious metal, under Pedro Lopez's direction."

"But what is this to us?"

"It is the means of our revenge. It will send Abbott Woodbank to prison for the rest of his life."

"I seek justice rather than revenge."

Jarl made an impatient gesture.

"Such talk is not for you and me. Let us be sensible. I will tell you what I know."

He then proceeded to explain how, being near Woodbank's house, he had heard dull sounds below the level of the ground, and stud-

ied out the truth, as his subsequent investigations proved.

All that occurred in the subterranean den was described, and stress laid on the fact that the guilt of Woodbank, once made known to the Government, would place him in prison and give them satisfaction.

"But that does not right my wrongs," urged Tiger-Lily.

Again, the hermit made an impatient gesture.

"As I have reasoned the matter out, the papers you wish to secure must be in the counterfeiting den. We are satisfied that they are not in Pedro Lopez's cabin, and he would naturally put them in the safest place. Therefore, I suggest that you enter the den and search it."

"It shall be done," was the prompt reply. "And you, Mr. Belvin—you have left your own home; will you not make your dwelling place with us now?"

"No," said Jarl quickly; "I prefer to go my own way."

"You condemn us, but I do not see why you should. You know our ways well enough to be sure we are not ordinary robbers, whatever people may say of us. You and Moza are my allies, and I know you would be safer here than elsewhere. You are welcome, if you will come."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE TEXAS CHICK MAKES A CALL.

TIGER-LILY made the offer with some show of diffidence, for she had always feared the hermit to a certain degree, but with sincerity and evident kindness.

But he shook his head without hesitation.

"No! You have mentioned this more than once, but I say now what I have always said before—let me go my own way. Say no more about it."

His wish was respected and obeyed, though Tiger-Lily still gave evidence of being hurt.

Jarl did not see fit to explain that, though he might be a dark and relentless avenger when he had a thing like Neal Belvin's murder to redress, he did not care to place himself on terms of equality with one who could commit so outrageous an assault as that on Walter Latimer; and had he not seen and heard the Texas Vultures on their way to slay the young man?

In the war against Pedro Lopez, Jarl and Tiger-Lily were united, however, and he gave the plan he had formed for recovering certain papers of importance to her.

He argued that a caving-in of the earth must be the reason that he had heard the operations of the counterfeiters from the surface of the ground, and that by an attack with spades at that point, an entrance could be made to the den.

It was, however, advisable to wait until they had quieted down a little after his own invasion.

Granting that Lopez had sent his man Pablo, to kill the hermit, the simultaneous disappearance of the two would puzzle Lopez a good deal, and there was a chance that he might show his hand still further in solving the mystery. And while he was doing so Jarl would also be on the watch.

All this being settled, Jarl said a curt farewell and left the cave. Once beyond it, he plunged into the bushes and went his way.

One man watched him out of sight, who was not supposed to be among the population of the underground retreat, as indeed he was not, though he would have given his last dollar to have the ability to pass the guard as Belvin had done.

This watcher was the Texas Chick.

He saw Jarl out of sight; and then, taking off his battered hat, applied five dirty fingers to his uncombed hair. Whether they wormed through the tangle to his head is an open question.

"So that's ther company you keep! Wal, I'm sorter sorry on't, fur you bey ther makin' o' a man 'bout yer, ef ye hadn't gone wrong. But ef all men was angels, Texas Chicks would be too thick fur a market value. Now, then, havin' follered ye ter this pint, an' seed ther entrance ter ther Vulture synagogue, how am I ter go furdur an' see ther citizens?"

Zeb put on his hat and lay watching the Vulture guard. He was in a tunnel under the hill which seemed shut up at the further end, but Jarl's coming and going had betrayed the secret and the spy could dimly see the guard. How was he to pass him? This was the main question in Zeb's mind.

"Wish I had Walt Latimer hyar now. Still-huntin' ez all correct in its way, but ef ther's a dog in ther orchard, I like a pard ter set on ther fence an' watch. I want ter go in hyar, bad. I begin ter size ther game o' Jarl an' Tiger-Lily, but they deal in blue-flame 'most too much fur my appetite. Now, ef I could pass that durned guard, I'd soon know ef bogus money is made in hyar. If not, perhaps—"

He ceased muttering as an idea occurred to him, and taking a stone the size of his fist, tossed it in the bushes beyond the tunnel.

The Vulture guard erected his head and listened.

Zeb waited a few seconds and repeated the experiment. At the third attempt the outlaw left his post and glided like a cat to investigate.

He passed directly under the Texas Chick, as the latter lay on the wall, but the dirt-smeared face escaped his notice. He passed the point of rock, and then Zeb dropped lightly down, darted inside the inner tunnel, and dropped behind a boulder.

At last the man had proved he was no coward, for only a brave man would deliberately invade the quarters of the Vultures.

Five minutes passed and then the guard returned, a surly look on his face, and resumed his post.

It was not until he had settled back with a careless air, however, that Zeb stirred from behind the boulder. During the pause, he had been listening and watching, but no particular good came of it. Some sort of a dark way stretched out in front of him, but it might have been a tomb so far as getting points was concerned.

Zeb, however, was not discouraged. He was sure he was in the lair of the Vultures, and if such was the case he would probably see all of them he desired before he was through.

Anon, he arose and glided toward the interior of the place, his movements like those of a cat. His hand was on his revolver, but he did not intend to use it unless pushed to the wall.

The way proved to be a perplexing one, with more passages than seemed necessary, and after following several he was so mixed-up that he did not know from which way he had come or anything about the matter more than that he was there.

He was going on in this blind sort of way when without due warning, he stumbled upon another man who muttered something Zeb could not understand and then came down to intelligibility.

"Hello! what 're doin', comrade?"

"I war jest a roamin' around fur ter get exercise," said the Chick, reluctant to do the man any damage, but not at all anxious to appear before Tiger-Lily.

"I'm a-goin' to zer works. Will you go, too?"

Zeb had no very clear idea what was meant by "the works," but he remembered his idea that counterfeiting was done in the cave and signified his willingness to go.

At least, he would get out of the labyrinth.

They went on for several rods, and the unknown kept up a running conversation which amounted to nothing but obliged Zeb very much, as he did not need to say anything; but while they were going along in a friendly way the leader suddenly broke the truce by wheeling, grappling with the Chick and bearing him to the ground.

Zeb was surprised or he might not have gone down so easily but he had taken the chances when he went into such company; so, recovering his wits, he laid hold in turn and forced the fighting with such a vim that a cry for help soon rolled lustily from the unknown's throat.

He did not have time to repeat it.

The intruder was thoroughly aroused, and whirling the fellow on his back, he compressed his throat and shut off both speech and wind.

"Not a durned word more!" he muttered. "Ef ye want ter roost with yer mates ter night, keep shady an' voice no cacklin'. You've run onto a rooster with spurs a yard long!"

There was no doubt but he had the fellow down to zero, but there was a patter of feet from the front and half a dozen men appeared with two torches in the van.

The Texas Chick had found the Vultures in dead earnest.

He saw his danger, and as quickly saw the only way out of it. He sprung to his feet, raising his prisoner at the same time as though he had been a child, and set him before his own body as a shield.

"All quiet 'round about hyar!" he coolly announced. "I've come in on business an' must see Tiger-Lily immediate. Don't delay ther case, fur chicken cholera may break out in ther coop."

"Shoot him!" gasped the half-strangled man.

"Don't do it!" Zeb promptly ordered. "I tell ye I've come ter see Tiger-Lily. Show me ter her!"

The new-comers had come to a halt and were looking in considerable perplexity. One of them found his voice, however.

"What've you got, Flea?"

"I've got a pris'ner," said the man who had been choked. "Don't you zee I have! I found him prowlin' 'round hyar an' froze ter him. He zays he wants ter zee zer queen. Wal, he's ball, an' ef he don't tell a straight zory, we'll hang him up ter dry."

"Now, you're talkin' solid sense," said Zeb, assuming a careless tone, but watching the Vultures warily, and prepared to work in if he saw a hostile move. "Lead on ter ther queen!"

His first acquaintance, whom he had recognized as The Honest Flea, had an ugly scowl on his face, but reluctant to have his comrades see him figure as a vanquished man, he took matters in his own hands and promptly added:

"This way!"

Some of the men looked doubtful, but they let The Flea have his way and the two walked past them.

Turning a point of rock they entered a part of the cave which was lighted, but Zeb was too deeply engaged in looking out for himself to observe a great deal more.

His guide, however, led the way straight to Tiger-Lily.

"Hyar's a critter I found spyin' in zer cave!" was his abrupt announcement. "I captured him an' brung him hyar, as you may zee."

The queen looked at the prisoner in surprise.

"Zeb White!" she exclaimed.

"Yas; but you needn't be afeared," the Chick replied.

The girl-outlaw laughed.

"I see nothing to be afraid of, sir. So you were captured while prowling about the cave?"

"I came in ter see you," Zeb stoutly answered.

"Did you? Then you shall see me, at once. Honest Flea, you may retire!"

Zeb started slightly and looked more closely at his self-styled captor, whose name he had not plainly caught before. He remembered hearing Latimer mention him the day he was found so severely injured.

The fellow went out and Tiger-Lily turned to Zeb, a perceptible eagerness in her manner.

"Have you any news?" she asked.

Zeb shifted his position uneasily and looked at the wall.

"Wal, I dunno—" he began, hesitatingly.

"Do not keep me in suspense. Speak at once."

"I don't think o' nothin' new," he acknowledged.

Her face grew hard and severe in a moment.

"Then why have you come here?"

"Why," said Zeb, trying in vain to think of a reasonable lie, "I was passin' an' so drapped in ter see you."

"And do you mean to say you have come here without any practical purpose?" she demanded, in a voice which made him scent trouble ahead.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ZEB FINDS AN OBJECTIONABLE COMPANION.

THE Texas Chick had a natural desire to keep out of trouble, and when he saw the way the wind was blowing he made a grand effort to set his sails properly.

"Wal, marm, I'm sorry ef I hain't welcome hyar," he said, with assumed humility, "but I kinder thort from ther way you used me when I come with Lopez, you seed I wasn't one o' his kind an' wa'n't disposed ter yank me off ther roost."

Tiger-Lily's face softened.

"You are right, sir, and if I was sure you did not come here as an enemy I would not use you any the worse now; but a good many people are meddling with the affairs of the Texas Vultures now and I have to use prudence. Why did you come?"

Zeb determined on a bold push.

"Wal, marm, I thought, mebba, you'd like ter hear from a man that's laid up in bed, an', prehaps, ter send him word you didn't hev ther share in his layin' out that people say you did."

Strangely gentle became the Queen's face.

"You believe me innocent?"

"I do!" said Zeb, making the statement as cheerfully as though he did not think her as evil and guilty as any assassin in Texas.

"Your hand, sir!"

Tiger-Lily moved forward and extended her own plump little hand, and the Chick did not decline it. He felt a thrill, too, under his dirt and rags, as it lay in his own broad palm, but this did not change his opinion.

"I will tell you now, Zeb White," she added, with what seemed impulsive frankness, "why I used you better than I did Lopez and his men. The Mexican is the most desperate villain in Texas, but—I had seen you with Mr. Latimer, and knew you to be his friend."

"So I am, marm," said Zeb, shifting his position uneasily, as he remembered that Walter's last words to him had been to command him to lead the way to the Vulture Queen that vengeance might be had.

"People accuse me of assaulting our friend," she resumed, "but I hope to prove the statement a base falsehood. There is something about it I do not understand, and some one used a base trick to fasten the guilt on me. But, sir, I am going to establish my innocence."

"Right you should, an' I hope you'll lay ther feathers o' ther inemy way over."

"Have you seen Mr. Latimer lately?"

"Not since he was knocked ter pieces. I don't hev ther entrance ter Woodbank mansion."

"I am anxious for your good opinion, honest Zeb, and now you are here we will show you the hospitality of the Texas Vultures. We are not so bad as we seem."

"Jest my opinion, marm."

Zeb rolled his tobacco zealously and tried to look as though he believed what he said.

"Are you still on good terms with Lopez?"

"Sen'ssly. He soured on me 'cause I wouldn't agree ter come hyar ag'in. He an' me are out."

"There are certain things about him I wish to know."

"What, fur example?"

The Vulture Queen hesitated. Zeb watched her narrowly. He had a deeper interest in the case than she supposed, for circumstances had brought him a good deal in contact with all parties. Looking at her face, too, he was not unmoved, and he wondered if it was possible she was less blood-stained than report said. The chances were against it.

Plainly, she had for a moment thought of telling him more than he knew, but caution had come to her aid and the confidence was not given. She asked a few more unimportant questions and then added:

"I am going to let you see you are not an unwelcome guest. We have facilities for making you comfortable, here, and we will do it. You shall be our guest until you wish to depart."

She touched a cord which hung from the wall by her side, the use of which the Chick did not understand, while he inwardly chuckled.

When he came to the cave he had not thought to operate openly, but as matters had gone he was to have the chance he desired and run no risk.

The touch on the cord had, really, sounded a bell and The Honest Flea soon appeared.

"This gentleman is to be our guest," said Tiger Lily, "and I place him in your charge, as you are already acquainted. Give him all possible hospitality, and free entrance to all parts of our quarters not private."

The Flea nodded, though his face was far from cheerful. He had pulled up his coat to hide the marks of Zeb's fingers on his neck and as his pride would not allow him to confess the choking, he had to agree to the programme.

Something of his surly hatred was visible in his face, and Tiger-Lily more serenely added:

"Be sure he has good treatment. I make you answerable!"

"I zee," answered the outlaw; "an' we will git along like two fawns together. Come erlong, pard; we'll be good friends."

"So we shall ef you don't rub my feathers ther wrong way," Zeb cautiously replied. "I'm a peacable chicken when used wal."

With this he made an awkward farewell gesture to Tiger-Lily and followed his guide.

The Honest Flea did not seem disposed to be so hospitable as he had been directed, and his answers to Zeb's remarks were surlily made. On the whole, the latter judged it would be just as well to keep his eyes open and give the honest man no chance to shoot him in the back.

When with Tiger Lily, the Chick had been so influenced that he admitted the possibility of her being innocent of the assault on Latimer. Once away, the doubt vanished and he saw matters in a plain light. These people were mere outlaws; Tiger-Lily had attempted Latimer's assassination; The Flea was her tool in the work; and though safety had been promised their uninvited guest, there was a strong probability of wrath to come.

So Zeb watched The Flea and gave him no chance for a snap-shot.

He was conducted to what seemed the main living room of the Vultures. Three men were visible there; their hands running through greasy cards. They looked in amazement at Zeb, but a motion from The Flea silenced them and the game went on.

In a short time, however, another footstep was heard and a fifth outlaw advanced with a step of conscious power. Zeb recognized him as Captain Scorpion, second in command among the Vultures, but the officer halted suddenly and looked at him stupidly.

"Who in perdition is this?" he then demanded.

"A visitor o' ther Queen's, zir," The Flea replied.

Scorpion opened his lips and then closed them again, but the survey he gave the Chick was far from being friendly.

"I jest dropped in on yer fur awhile, by way o' pastime," Zeb said, not wholly at ease. "I'm acquainted with ther Queen."

"Are you the fellow who calls himself the Texas Chick?" Scorpion sourly asked.

"I hev that honor."

"It's all right, I suppose. Flea, come with me!"

The two men went aside, while Zeb pretended to watch the card-playing, but really watched more sharply for hostile motions from the pair. Despite Scorpion's last words, he knew the man was angry because he was there, and something unpleasant might come of it.

On the whole, the Chick wished himself out of the cave.

After a little conversation, Scorpion and The Flea wandered away, still talking, and disappeared. Zeb pretended to still watch the game, but he was tempted to make an attempt to get out of the crowd. He believed he knew the way in which lay the cave exit, but if he tried for it there was a possibility he might have flying lead for a companion by the way.

The outlook was not pleasant.

At the end of ten minutes The Flea returned alone.

"Ther Queen zays ez how she wants ter zee you," he announced in his usual way.

Zeb suspected that Scorpion had seen Tiger-Lily and urged her to reconsider her decision, but now that he was committed to the game he would not waver.

He followed his surly guide with outward willingness, and was led along the route they had lately traveled.

At last The Flea paused.

"Go in," he said; "you'll find me hyar when you come out."

"In" referred to a passage in the rocks, and Zeb entered without a suspicion that he would not find Tiger-Lily there. As he passed the point of rocks, however, he paused. Instead of the Queen's room he was in a spacious, gloomy and barren place, which had no resemblance to Tiger-Lily's room.

Zeb took one glance and then wheeled. As he did so the apparently solid rock behind him fell with a crash, and a cloud of dust arose around him.

Comprehending the truth he went through it, however; went through, but only to bring up against the rock with full force.

The dust sifted away, and he saw that even a mouse would have been troubled to pass the barrier. At the end of two minutes he knew no man could, unless he knew the secret of the combination.

Perhaps the majority of men would then and there have raised their voices in a series of shouts, but the Texas Chick did nothing of the kind.

He sat down on a rock and looked about him as well as he was able. The light was that of day, but intervening obstacles had so broken it that he could see no more than piled up bowlders of all shapes and in supreme confusion.

"Wal, I zepine I'm yanked off ther roost," he muttered. "Might 'a' know'd 'twould happen, an' I now perceive what comes o' keepin' bad company. I'm in a durned pretty fix, an' ef I pull through with my comb on my head I'm a lucky rooster."

While muttering he had by no means been idle. His revolver was out and in convenient form for a prompt head, and his keen eyes were devouring everything visible in the semi-gloom.

With treachery afoot, it was not likely the Vultures would be content with dropping a rock near his heels.

Those who had known Zeb only as a careless, unwashed man of rags, and freely branded him a coward, would have been surprised to see how he now came to the front. Yet, he was true to his old ways and, though on the alert for danger and as ready as a panther for a spring, an artist in search of a model would never have taken the quiet figure on the bowlder for that purpose.

Anon, he decided that no immediate attack need be apprehended and he slowly arose.

He was in a trap. There could be no doubt about that; but the nature of it was not so clear. The only way to learn more was to do some exploring.

It was well for Tiger-Lily that she did not appear to Zeb just then. He saw he had been deceived and the knowledge angered him more than his misfortune. If the tide turned and left him afloat, at any time in the future, let the Vulture Queen beware!

Investigation showed that he was in a sort of tunnel. The piled-up bowlders on each side made matters uncertain, but if the evidence was trustworthy his only way out was straight ahead—and that was but a venture.

He went on along the tunnel, sharply watching by the way. A break in the rocks showed clear sky above where daylight penetrated, but it was up a bare rock; no hopes of escape there.

A hundred feet beyond he paused abruptly. A snarl had sounded from the rocks at one side and Zeb looked up quickly. He had heard the sound before that day. And what he saw did not surprise, half as much as it worried, him.

Standing on a bowlder, and looking down with his jaws well open, was a big jaguar.

The Texas Chick looked once and stood still. He would rather have seen half a dozen Vultures than one such animal. But his wishes were not regarded, and the beast suddenly made a leap and cut down the intervening distance by a half.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

LATIMER SEEKS LIGHT.

TIGER LILY'S visit proved a wonderful medicine for the Virginian. The following morning he was better than at any time since he was wounded; so much better that all were surprised, and Constance playfully asked what new doctor had visited him.

It was a chance shot, but it went so true that it was fortunate the young lady stood where she could not see his face. He was dumfounded for a moment, but Moza covered his confusion with feminine tact and it passed unnoticed.

Very kindly the invalid felt and acted toward Moza. They had been friends from the first, and now he knew her to be Tiger-Lily's friend, also, he looked to her with increased friendliness.

In a quiet way he tried to have the half-breed explain something about the Vulture Queen and herself, and their relationship toward each other in a business way, but Moza was respectfully mute on that point.

Latimer's conscience was troubling him a good deal. He was the guest of Abbott Woodbank, but, knowing Tiger-Lily was his sworn foe, he was making friends with her and hiding from his nominal uncle facts and occurrences which a guest should not conceal.

All this troubled the Virginian, but there was only one way out and that road he did not wish to take. He must either hold his peace, and let matters take their course, or break faith with Tiger-Lily.

Right or wrong, he was not prepared to do that.

What was the cause of trouble between them? The girl-outlaw had accused Woodbank of wronging her bitterly. In what way had it been done? Latimer went over the ground carefully and imagined all he could, but the only result was a determination to make her confide in him when they met again.

That day he left his room for the first time since the assault. At first it was his intention to confine his movements to the piazza, but he felt so unexpectedly strong that he went several rods from the house and back.

The following day he went further, and another thing he did. Remembering the Texas Chick with gratitude, he sent a messenger to the still-hunter's cabin, but it was silent and deserted and the ashes were cold on the hearth.

He did not know that, twenty-four hours before, Zeb had gone to the cave of the Vultures and had been given so warm a welcome that he could not tear himself away readily.

Night closed in with plenty of clouds over the sky, yet with an atmosphere which made it unusually agreeable. Latimer had slept for some time in the afternoon, and when he became awake during the night he resolved to go out and get the fresh air. It must be confessed that, when making this decision, he remembered how another night's vigil had brought him in contact with Tiger-Lily, and dimly wondered if such a thing might not happen again.

But the piazza was silent and deserted by all except him, and he smoked his cigar without raising any dark forms as on the previous occasion.

Descending to the ground he walked on toward the west. Far away a dark line, darker than sky or prairie, marked Thornpath Chaparral, and the Virginian allowed his thoughts to take a considerable stretch for a practical man.

His purposeless steps brought him to the *motte*, and he sat down on the rustic bench.

Half an hour passed.

Then the murmur of voices broke in on the silence, and he saw several dark objects moving along the edge of the bushes. They were mounted men, and their course was toward him.

The latter fact no sooner became clear than the Virginian deserted the bench and lay down beneath it. As a refuge it was not of the best kind, but nothing better was at hand, and from the position he could watch to advantage.

His first idea had been that the men were of the Vulture band, and he expected to see them pass the *motte*, but when they turned to the left, entered among the trees and halted not a hundred feet away, it began to look more neighborly than he had expected.

He looked in vain for Tiger-Lily, and when the men spoke it was in a tone so low he could hear nothing.

It was far from prudent to leave his refuge, so he lay close and watched.

Had he been sure they were not the Vulture Queen's men he would have mentally pronounced them cut-throats of the first water. True, their faces were not to be distinctly seen, and their dress seemed the typical Texan one; but their manner was secret and stealthy, and one of them kept at the edge of the timber, and watched the prairie and Woodbank house constantly.

Was Tiger-Lily about to make a demonstration against the ranch-owner?

It was not a pleasant thing to contemplate, and the young man wished himself back at the house. Wronged the Queen might have been, but beyond a certain point she could not go and have his toleration.

And an attack at midnight certainly ought to be barred out.

Before Latimer suspected such a thing, other men were in the *motte*. Where they came from was uncertain. Earth and air seldom yield up men, and it was safe to presume they came naturally, however.

At any rate, they fraternized with the first-comers, and the watcher saw several objects conveyed to one of the horses and strapped to his body. These objects seemed to be small

packages, but they were heavy enough to require some strength to raise them.

It occurred to Latimer that Woodbank's house had been robbed.

What should he do about it?

His duty was plain; but he thought of Tiger-Lily, and hesitated. If those were her men he would renew the trouble between them by a demonstration.

Curiously enough, it did not occur to him then, that if the Vulture Queen was a plain, practical robber, the sooner he broke the hold she had gained on him, the better.

He did resolve to know more about the matter, however, and he left his hiding-place and crept cautiously toward them.

The work seemed done, and two of the men were standing at one side, busily talking.

Latimer crept toward them, his revolver drawn. He realized the risk he was taking, but his courage was not of the kind which avoids risks.

He had just gained a position behind a tree, when there was a movement at his feet, and a man arose and stood facing him!

It was an unexpected and unpleasant occurrence, and from the first Latimer felt that they were enemies.

"What in perdition—"

Thus far the man spoke, when the Virginian stopped his speech. Extending his left hand quickly, he caught him by the neck, and the question remained unasked.

The hatchet was dug up, however, and the stranger launched out a fierce blow at Latimer's head. The latter nimbly evaded it, and feeling that he was called upon for prompt action, struck his antagonist's feet from under him, and they fell together, going down so suddenly that Latimer could not save himself.

A moment of keen suspense followed. Their struggle had been almost noiseless, but guilty minds make acute ears. There was, however, no sign that an alarm had been given, and Latimer, still holding his prisoner, paid attention to him once more.

He lay silent and motionless under his knee, and as he did not struggle, there was only one conclusion to be drawn. The fall had in some way knocked out his senses, probably because the tree was harder than his head.

The Virginian had discovered this much when a voice arose on the other side of the tree.

"Blue Bill!"

It was a simple call, but as no answer was returned, Latimer had an unpleasant suspicion. The man under his knee was Blue Bill, and he was wanted.

Perhaps it was wise, since his strength was not suitable for a foot-race, and perhaps it was foolish; but if the latter, there are moments in all men's lives when they yield to reckless impulses; but in any case the Virginian suddenly resolved to trust to the darkness, present himself as the genuine Bill and endeavor to learn more concerning these mysterious men.

Therefore, he walked coolly around the tree.

"Oh! you're here, are you?" the previous speaker sarcastically said. "Been asleep, as usual, I see. Confound you, I wish you'd take two weeks solid at it, some time, and then keep awake. Mount and away, men!"

If he had seen fit to require an answer it would have gone hard with Latimer, but at the last words the men turned to their horses and no inquisitive gaze was upon him.

He delayed his movements until all the horses except one were appropriated and then swung himself into the empty saddle. Every moment he expected to hear from the genuine Blue Bill, but no betraying voice arose.

And then the party rode forth from the *motte* and headed toward the chaparral. Latimer's fortunes were for the time cast with them, and he was going on a journey, and to an experience, of which he then knew nothing.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A WILD NOCTURNAL EXPERIENCE.

It must not be supposed that Latimer had engaged, in this desperate venture, from any purely reckless motive. There was a dash of recklessness about it, it is true; but his prime motive was to get out of a close corner in the easiest way.

No time had been given him for elaborate thought; he had been obliged to plan and execute in haste and take his chance of repenting at leisure.

As they rode from the *motte* he managed to fall back to the rear, where he would be less likely to be observed and his cheat revealed, and from there he tried to analyze his companions.

The darkness which screened him did the same for them, however, and he was unable to even tell whether he had seen them before. The leader, certainly, was not Captain Scorpion, of the Vultures. They seemed rough-and-ready, cool-headed men, and that was all he could tell.

He wondered a good deal what load the unriden horse bore. It made little bulk, but he had seen that it was heavy when they lifted it to the horse's back. Had Woodbank possessed

any plate a theory would have been easy, but silverware and Western Texas did not go together.

Latimer tried to decide what to do. He regretted not having dashed away as soon as he had mounted. But the chance had been neglected and he resolved to see the matter to an end, or, at least, to continue for a time in their company.

Luckily, he seemed to grow stronger in the saddle, and felt almost as well as ever.

The party neared the chaparral, and Latimer judged they intended to enter. Was it possible they were of Tiger-Lily's band? It began to seem so, and yet his belief was against it. In an important work, surely the Queen or Captain Scorpion would be there.

They reached the wood and halted in the shade of the trees. The branches projecting over where they sat made the place intensely dark. Latimer might then have slipped from his saddle and entered the bushes unseen, but something caused him to delay.

The leader and two companions went aside and began to converse in a low tone.

Latimer was still hesitating, when suddenly, the horse which bore the mysterious burden gave a great bound, and then shot out over the prairie at full speed.

For a moment the unknown men seemed dazed, and then the leader uttered a curse.

"Pursue!" he added, hotly; "run the cursed brute down!"

He struck his own horse as he spoke, and dashed away, closely followed by his men. Latimer remained behind; it was a chance to get rid of his companions he was not slow to improve. He pulled sharply on the bit and spoke to his horse, but the animal had a will of its own, and instead of going toward the house, started after its comrades.

The Virginian was quick-witted enough to see that he had a headstrong brute in hand, and as he was not ready to go the horse's way he went one of his own and promptly leaped from the saddle.

Next, he glanced around to take in the situation. He wished himself back at Woodbank's, but two miles of prairie intervened, and he doubted the wisdom of trying to make it while the strangers were about.

Accordingly, he turned and hastened toward the bushes. Without hesitation he plunged into the dark shadows, and from there into the bushes. What he was to do next he did not know, but he had a dim idea of hiding.

His ideas changed, however, when he had gone a few feet. There was a rustling of the bushes, and a dark form arose beside him. He started back, remembering that jaguars were said to haunt the place, but the movement was too late.

He found himself seized in an embrace too strong for that of friendship, for his bones seemed to bend before it, and a muscular hand closed over his throat. No jaguar was the assailant; though seemingly strong enough for one, but a man; and a man bent on murder, if signs went for anything.

Latimer grasped the hand at his throat and tried to tear it away. Vain effort!—the grasp was like that of a giant. He tried to reach his revolver, too, but the stranger's lower arm shut off all chance.

The struggle forced the latter back, however, and the edge of the bank was reached and passed. Footing failed them and they began to fall.

The Virginian flung out one hand instinctively; it encountered a sapling and he caught and held fast, while his assailant went crashing down the bank.

Latimer had not been sufficiently choked to impair either his strength or judgment and he darted a few yards away and dropped in the bushes. Brave though he was he had a prudent fear for the terrible unknown and did not care to have him on his track in a race.

Therefore, crouching in the bushes, he held his revolver ready for use and listened keenly.

No sound came from the unknown. Except for the voices of the horsemen out on the prairie, and the natural voices of the wood, all was profound silence.

Latimer was puzzled. Could it be the fall had stunned his late antagonist? Such a thing did not seem probable, though it was possible. The young man reviewed the case and decided that the fellow must be in as good condition as himself. Where, then, was he? Had he decided to withdraw, or was he stealing on him like a panther on its prey?

The last idea seemed the most likely, and Latimer kept as still as the trees beside him and waited and watched.

Something outside his personal care soon occurred to break the lull, however.

The horsemen were returning, and the voice of the leader arose in a high and angry key.

"The man who tied it on was a fool!" he exclaimed. "Sam Painter, I have a good mind to knock you to pieces for this."

"Better not try," was the surly response. "I say the tying was well done, and I don't see how even the unaccountable bolt the mare made could have thrown it off. I don't understand

it, at all, but, of course, it hasn't walked away since it fell."

Latimer dimly understood that they referred to the unknown burden of the led horse, which seemed to have fallen from its back, but as they reached the shadow of the trees he lay still closer and watched.

"Where is it?" asked the leader, looking on the ground.

"It fell about here."

"Then it should be about here, now."

They moved about, passing hands and feet over the ground in search of the missing article.

"This is infernal strange."

"Must have dropped inside the bushes."

So they looked inside the bushes for a reasonable distance, but the search was in vain, as their dissatisfied words showed.

Sam Painter seemed to have an idea, and he walked to the side of the mare and began an examination.

"See here!" he then exclaimed; "there's been treachery. The straps are cut."

"Cut! Fire and brimstone!"

The leader strode to his side and went through the same investigation.

"You're right!" he added, emphatically. "The load did not lose off, but was cut away. There's treachery, sure enough. Are we all here?"

The men stood up to be counted.

"Where is Blue Bill?"

No one answered, and when Blue Bill's name was called in a higher key only the rustling of the wind made answer.

Latimer began to feel decidedly uncomfortable. He saw the wrath to come looming up in the near distance, and it was clear that if he fell into the hands of his enemies then it would go hard with him. And he was so close to the strangers that an escape would result in his immediate discovery.

"Blue Bill has played us false and stolen the money!" the leader furiously exclaimed. "I expected some such infernal game; I never trusted that fellow."

Probably he had never had a doubt until that moment, but the doubt was a healthy infant then.

"It ain't too late to get it back," said Painter. "The horses are all here; he must have dragged it into the bushes. Pursue, men, and we'll run him down!"

They plunged into the bushes and Latimer put up his revolver and drew a knife. Clearly, trouble was close at hand. He had time to run, but flight would bring the whole gang on him in a heap, and by lying low he took the only chance to get out of it safely. He knew the strangers were desperate men, and the mention of the word "money" had given him an idea.

He remembered the counterfeiters the Texas Chick was still hunting and believed he had met them. Such men would hold a human life cheaply.

They entered the undergrowth simultaneously and the search began in earnest. Knowing the weight of the missing article, they also knew no one could have carried it far, so they did not extend their search widely. Wherever the thief was, the money must be close at hand.

Twice searchers passed so near that Latimer could have touched them as he lay on the ground; then after them came one man, who was going slowly but surely, letting nothing escape him by the way.

The Virginian braced himself for a struggle, but he was far from craving it. Very likely an encounter would result in the shedding of blood, and he had no desire to take human life. Yet, if pushed to the wall, he was resolved to care for himself first of all, and avoid being pounded as he had been on that very bank on a former occasion.

Nearer came the searcher; nearer came the danger. The man seemed to be looking for the missing property, rather than the thief, and no crevice escaped his attention.

Nearer yet! Latimer's breath came in short gasps, and he prepared for a leap.

But, when the man was scarcely a yard away, the Virginian dimly saw a dark form arise behind him. A second of suspense and then the man was jerked backward, a dull thud followed and his feet beat the ground convulsively for a moment. Then he was lowered carefully to the ground, for the death-struggle had given no alarm, and a tall, powerful form stood above him, victor in a sanguinary encounter.

CHAPTER XXX.

ZEB HELPS HIMSELF.

THE Texas Chick felt a cold chill run down his back as the jaguar made its leap. The distance then separating them was slight, and he knew an encounter must in all probability come, but he did not covet it. Before that day he had fought animals of the tiger species, and knew them too well to like the family.

The animal, after its first leap, had alighted on a boulder of bee-hive shape, and standing there, its supple, muscular body was revealed in all its dangerous beauty. The parted lips showed its white teeth and red tongue, while its long

tail waved back and forth as slowly and gracefully as the fan of a coquettish woman, with about the same amount of danger suggested.

Zeb dropped slowly upon his knees and as slowly raised his rifle. It was of vital importance that he secured a shot before the animal leaped. A sudden movement would hasten the catastrophe.

The rifle was at a bead, and the Chick glanced along the barrel. His face was calm, though he realized his danger, and the weapon did not waver a fraction of an inch.

Click!

He pulled the trigger; the hammer fell, but only a dull click followed. The weapon had missed fire!

Drawing a deep breath Zeb tore off the useless cap, but, before he could get another so far as from his pocket, he saw the sinewy legs of the beast draw up beneath it and knew what was coming.

The rifle was tossed to the floor; he drew his knife with a jerk and faced the jaguar, his form braced for the shock.

And the beautiful, but deadly, animal, emitting a scream as a forerunner, arose in the air and dropped full upon the brave man.

Not an atom did he quail, but with all his force drove the keen knife full at the swart breast. It went true to its aim and hot blood spurted into Zeb's face, but in the same moment he was dashed to the ground by the jaguar's weight.

What followed he never really understood, but he had a dim recollection, afterward, of rolling about with the beast and himself uppermost alternately, and of driving the knife home again and again—and then he lost consciousness.

When he recovered he was lying on his back and feeling sick and dizzy. He moved slightly and experienced pain; but as he had felt all these before, he struggled bravely to a sitting position.

By his side was the jaguar, but the once supple limbs were death stiffened and the beautiful body gashed and blood-covered. Somehow, Zeb had won the victory before he lost all ability to act, and man and beast, victor and vanquished, had laid down together, mathematically side by side, the one seemingly as dead as the other.

But the Texas Chick had escaped the death-trail and was there to attend what obsequies were necessary.

"Wal, I opine!" he muttered. "Hyar's my pard, dead ez a Christmas fowl, an' hyar be I with my feathers all out o' plumb an' my comb pretty badly mangled. Wonder ef I kin crow!"

He raised his arms and moved them like a pair of wings, but all the bones seemed there and unbroken. He arose to his feet. The movement was attended with pain, but he saw that he was all there and not greatly weakened by the desperate fight.

"Wal, I've got out o' one part o' ther scrape, but I ain't so sure o' ther other. It's clear ther durned Vultures put me in hyar ter be chewed up by ther painter, an' ther may be other dangers hov'ring over me. I'll see!"

He recapped his rifle, wiped his blood-stained knife on the jaguar's hide and moved down the dim tunnel.

He had not gone far, however, before he suddenly paused. A peculiarity in the ray of sunshine which fell through the opening at the top of the tunnel arrested his attention and caused him great surprise.

By the direction in which the yellow ray fell, he knew it must be from the morning sun and realized that a whole night had passed since his meeting with the jaguar.

It was hard to believe, but, nevertheless, a fact.

Zeb pushed on for several yards, finding the same scene of piled-up boulders by the way, but no place of exit; and then the tunnel ended at solid rock.

"I s'pose so!" he muttered sulkily. "Got me jammed in hyar ter fat, an' kill, an' send ter market. I like it, I do! Oh! wouldn't I jest like ter hev Tiger-Lily, Scorpion an' Ther Tarnal Flea hyar—one at a time!"

He walked back to where the tunnel formed its chimney and scanned the rocks closely. The outlook seemed a hopeless one.

Something must be done, however, and he began to search the lower part of the trap, hoping to find a way of escape. None appeared.

With his chances thus narrowed he saw he must either climb the chimney or stay in. He shook his head frequently when looking for the most advantageous point, and if it had been possible to return to the main cave would have taken his chances there.

But there was no choice.

So he slung his rifle over his back and commenced the upward journey. He had selected a point where a few jutting points of rock would help his feet and hands; yet it was a desperate venture.

For twice his own height he went easily, and then the labor began. He had muscle of the best kind, and it was soon thoroughly tested. Now and then he gained secure footing, where

he could stop for breath, but for the most time it was a hard and dangerous struggle, and he often swung by his hands alone.

The top grew nearer very slowly, but it was a long distance to the toiling man, who began to feel exhausted.

And if he missed his hold and fell to the bottom it was sure death.

He was still several feet from the top when a hail from below startled him. He paused and looked down.

The Honest Flea stood at the foot of the chimney, looking up.

"I zay, come down!" ordered the honest man.

Zeb made no answer, but resumed his climbing.

"None o' that, you durned critter! I zay, come down, an' when I zay a thing, I mean it. Come down!"

The Texas Chick heard the click of his rifle, but it only accelerated his speed.

"Come down, or I'll put a bullet through ye!" howled The Flea.

The top was very near, and Zeb hastened on. Once, in his hurry, his left hand missed its hold, and he nearly fell, but he recovered by a great effort, and kept on. If time had been given him to think coolly he would have agreed, however, that he was sure to be pierced by the Vulture's bullet and fall a mangled heap on the hard ground or jagged rocks below.

"Fur ther last time, stop er I fire!" howled The Flea.

Zeb's only answer was to swing himself a little higher, and then a thunder-like report filled the tunnel as the rifle was discharged. The imperiled man felt a thrill of horror which was not cowardice, but a dull *chug!* and a slight shock at his back told a story he understood even then.

The bullet had struck his own rifle and saved his life.

Another moment and he swung his arms over the top of the chimney and, with a great effort, drew himself to the level. There, he sunk nearly exhausted to the ground.

He was on the top of the ridge and the immediate vicinity was bleak and bare of all save rocks, but the green woods were beyond and God's light over him. He drank in the fresh air in great breaths and felt new life run through his veins.

It would not do to stop long, for The Flea would give the alarm, but his strength was not what he needed.

It was speedily tested, however.

A rock rattled close behind him and he looked up to see that a man had stolen upon him, his eyes glittering with an unfriendly light. Seeing himself discovered, he drew a revolver and leveled it at Zeb's head.

The latter had but partially arisen, but he saw his danger and was equal to the requirements of the case. He flung out one hand with wonderful quickness and grasped the revolver, turning its muzzle just as it was discharged.

The bullet went wide.

The men grappled, limb to limb, and set every nerve for the mastery. Zeb was still weak, and he managed to trip his antagonist and fall heavily upon him. He had hoped this would stun or disable him, but he still had a hard man with whom to contend.

Over and over they whirled on the ground. Ordinarily the better man of the two, the Chick was now abundantly able to care for himself, but the stranger escaped from every vantagehold he secured and proved as hard to hold as an eel.

Zeb grew desperate. Every moment he expected to see the Vultures pouring out with The Flea at their head, and their coming meant death to him.

He gathered all his strength for a final effort and managed to force his antagonist back. They were temptingly near a stone, and as Zeb had no desire to stain his hands with the blood of a man who might not be so bad as he seemed, he used the stone practically and the unknown released his hold and lay quiet.

The victor sprang to his feet. The vanquished had a chance to do the same at his leisure and had cause to consider himself a very lucky man.

Then Zeb picked up his rifle, plunged into the bushes and the scene was left silent and without activity.

Walter Latimer witnessed the death of the man in the bushes with a surprise which did not go beyond the comparative degree. He understood that the slayer must be the man who had stolen the treasure from the horse's back, and it was natural he should wish to preserve what he had so boldly won.

But who was he?

The question bade fair to be answered when he turned toward Latimer's hiding place and rustled the bushes with his hand. The Virginian did not stir and was at a loss to know whether he ought to regard the man as friend or foe.

"Come out, Latimer!"

Profound astonishment assailed the young man then, for he did not suppose any one knew the secret of his hiding-place, but he noticed

that the voice was low and cautious; it was not one an enemy would be likely to assume.

"Come!" the unknown impatiently added, as Walter hesitated. "I have done this deed for your sake; come out while you may!"

The Virginian hesitated no longer, but arose. "Follow me boldly; they will mistake us for their comrades."

The idea was so simple, Latimer wondered he had not thought of it before, but he had another idea to keep it company. The voice was familiar.

Still he said nothing until they had passed beyond the bushes and gained the prairie grass.

"Jar!" he then said, in a subdued voice.

"Wait!" was the even reply. "Let us have a hundred yards to the good before stopping."

Latimer did not object. They moved along where the branches overhung the open ground, thus getting deep shadow and a chance for secrecy at one and the same time. The guide was indeed the chaparral hermit.

The noise made by the searchers died away in the distance as they went, and Jarl finally paused and grounded his rifle.

"We may call ourselves safe now, if we keep our eyes and ears open. I, for one, shall do so while you are in my company. You have a peculiar faculty for getting into trouble. Look out that you don't encounter your last one some of these days!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

AN OBSTINATE MAN.

LATIMER flushed boldly. He came of a family known as brave men, and against whom the finger of scorn could not be pointed; and though Jarl Belvin's words were not a taunt they cut deeply.

Then and there he resolved to some day let Jarl see he was neither a coward nor a milksop, even though he died for it.

"All this does not change the fact that I owe you another debt of gratitude. I don't exactly understand from what I have escaped, however, for I don't know who those men are."

"That's easily told," Jarl replied. "They are counterfeiters."

"I suspected as much. Do they belong about here?"

"No. It is the gang that takes the spurious money to market."

"Their chances of taking this lot is not good," said Walter, smiling.

"Why not?"

"Didn't you take it away from them?"

"Yes."

"Certainly not. What gave you that idea?"

The hermit spoke honestly, but Latimer was not so easily convinced. It was not likely that part of the wood was full of men, and the bold device by which the treasure had been stolen was like Jarl.

"I will tell you my whole story in a minute. First of all, where is this bogus money made?"

"That I don't know," Jarl replied.

"By whom, then, is it made?"

"That I don't know."

Latimer made an impatient gesture.

"Do not treat me as you would a boy, Belvin. True, I am not a veteran Texan, but I am an honest man, and not in sympathy with counterfeiting. I believe you know enough about these fellows to bring them to a calamitous end."

"Pray, where do you pick up so much information?" Jarl sarcastically asked.

"I am not blind!" Latimer retorted.

"You are blind; so blind that you cannot see the pit into which an unscrupulous woman is leading you," the hermit coldly replied.

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that the Vulture Queen is making a fool of you. She hates Abbott Woodbank, but her road to revenge is a rough one and she has several points not easily gotten over. Your co-operation is in some way necessary—how, I do not know—and for that purpose she is deliberately leading you by the nose, as the saying goes. And yet, you are not blind!"

The cold sarcasm of the words was indescribable.

Latimer flushed hotly and felt a strong desire to knock the hermit down; but by a strong effort he curbed his anger.

"You are her ally, whether I am or not, and should be able to make plain her real purpose."

"I am not in her confidence," Jarl interrupted.

"Beyond the fact that she hates Woodbank and seeks revenge, I know nothing. What she wants of you I do not know; but, by-and-by, her siren voice will ask some favor of you destined to crush Woodbank, even while her heart is as rotten as Dead Sea fruit!"

A cold fury came over the Virginian and he grasped the hermit's arm tightly.

"I have had enough of this, Jarl Belvin. Your apish airs of mystery are not to my liking. I demand an explanation and I will have it."

"Be calm!" was the icy reply.

"Answer me, mocking devil, or I will strangle you where you stand!"

"Be calm!"

Latimer fairly gasped with rage and then his hand fell by his side. He had made a rash

threat; one he neither wished to, nor could, keep. He drew a long breath which was almost a groan. Jarl was a rock against which it was folly to dash.

"You are an incomprehensible man. As the putative friend of Tiger-Lily I have trusted you but you now turn against her. Why?"

Jarl hesitated before he replied.

"Let me give you information on your own affairs and then make no further attempt to understand mine," he finally said. "I have almost absolute proof that the men who nearly killed you in the chaparral were sent by Tiger-Lily to trap and kill you. Certainly, they were on the ground then, for I saw Captain Scorpion, and I heard him say Tiger-Lily ought to pay them well for the work, as it was hard moving in the chaparral by night. The next morning you were found nearly murdered. Draw your own conclusions!"

Naturally, this outline did not satisfy Walter, and Jarl then gave the story in detail, as we heard it told to Moza at Woodbank's house.

The Virginian was staggered, but, when he was sure he had heard all his companion could, or would, tell, he made haste to change the subject; and, as the counterfeiters began to widen their circle of investigation, they walked away and he told of his own experience of the night.

Then, again he asked for light on the counterfeiting business and, again, was refused.

"Your repeated rebuffs are enough to discourage a common man, but I am persevering on this subject, if on no other. I believe you know all about these men. Answer one question, at least. Is Abbott Woodbank innocent of connection with them?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"These men, when they halted in the *motte*, sent several of their number empty-handed toward, if not to, my uncle's house. They returned bearing what you admit was bogus money. This looks suspicious. Now, for the last time, is Woodbank concerned in this unlawful work?"

"I do not know!"

Jarl spoke with his usual calmness, though without any attempt at assumed frankness.

Latimer made an impatient gesture.

"Enough! We will say no more. Good-night."

They had reached the *motte*, and he wheeled and strode away alone.

Another mystery was added to all that had come under his notice, and in the privacy of his room he considered many points in the series of strange events, prominent among which were three questions:

Was Abbott Woodbank connected with the counterfeiters? Was it Jarl who robbed the guard by the chaparral's edge? Was Tiger-Lily really as guilty as the hermit declared?

Hard questions to answer, all of them; but, though calm reasoning impelled him to say "Yes" to the first two, he would not answer the same to the last.

The spell was over him, and he stubbornly refused to think the Vulture Queen was all evil.

The following day Latimer was none the worse for his night's adventure. On the contrary, he seemed to have improved a good deal, and during the forenoon walked with Constance to the *motte*.

Without mentioning what had occurred there the previous night, he managed to look the ground over. The marks of the horses' feet were there, but that was all.

Constance had never been in a more charming mood. She united tender solicitude for his welfare with refined buoyancy of spirit, and her conversation sparkled with happy ideas; but all fell lifeless on Latimer's understanding.

She was but a pale, flickering light to a glorious star he knew—Tiger-Lily! And yet, it is not likely he would have seen that day's sun go down without giving Miss Woodbank a betrothal kiss had there been no Tiger Lily.

"Fate steals along with noiseless tread," as Cowper has well said.

During the afternoon Latimer went to ride with Randal Woodbank. He did something more. He asked Moza to get word to Tiger-Lily, as soon as she could, that he was ready to visit her at the cave at the earliest possible moment.

Detailed comment is unnecessary; while men live and love they will go blindly, recklessly on where their star leads. Latimer had considered all Jarl had told him, but he was ready to believe there was a mistake somewhere, and that the girl-outlaw was not so evil as she was reputed.

At all events, he would go to the cave and test her.

Parentetically, we will say we believe there is a case on record where a mouse tested a trap.

He had expected some delay, but when Moza informed him the following morning that he could see the Queen before noon, he considered himself a lucky man. Randal had proposed another ride, but Latimer evaded the invitation and prepared to keep the appointment as made with Tiger-Lily.

Before going he took the precaution to arm himself thoroughly, doing that much in justice to common-sense.

At the appointed hour he was at the edge of the chaparral, and at the stated place.

He had not come any too soon. Another man was already there, and when a few mystic words had passed between them, as directed by Tiger-Lily, they threw off the first caution and reserve.

"Havin' discovered ther strawberry marks, we kin now go on," said the outlaw, cheerfully.

"Not through those thorny bushes, I hope," said Walter, remembering his previous experience.

"Ha! ha! They are only difficult fur ther oninitiated. Kem on, an' I'll show ye ther best road ye ever trod."

If he didn't keep his word fully, he did at least find a path where traveling was easy. At times it was but a ribbon, winding here and there, hedged by leaves which touched them as they walked; and on the whole, mysterious and wonderful, as the Virginian was free to confess.

But, in due time, the cave was reached, and the visitor conducted inside without any ceremony, or the tying on of a bondage for his eyes, all of which encouraged him.

No other Vultures, except the guard, appeared, and Latimer was promptly ushered into Tiger-Lily's presence.

She came forward quickly, and as the guide went away, gave Latimer her hand. Neither spoke at once. He was dazzled by her loveliness, and she—well, her voice was not quite even when she spoke.

"I am very glad, Mr. Latimer, to see that you have the strength to come here, whether I approve of the coming or not."

"As for the last part, it is enough that you allowed me to come."

He would have lifted her hand to his lips, but she withdrew it quickly.

"Remember I am an outlaw," she said.

"You have taught me that all outlaws are not evil."

"Make sure of that before you ask for my hand," she said, seriously; then, smiling brightly.

"But come, my honored guest, and you shall have such hospitality as we can give."

She conducted him to a rustic chair made of chaparral wood, cushioned, and then covered over all with a jaguar robe. He saw this, and cast one glance about the room, which had many comforts one would not expect to see there, and then turned to the Queen.

She looked a queen, indeed. Less somberly dressed than when he had seen her before, she had plainly used sundry feminine artifices to please the eyes of her visitor—as though her magnificent loveliness was not enough.

But all went together, and Walter had not been there ten minutes before he knew he was hopelessly in love. Outlaw or not, angel or demon, his mind was fixed and he was prepared to follow where she led. Prudence was thrust in the rear and he looked at her with a love as deep as it was honorable. Of that there was no doubt. His own status in the drama of their lives was fixed; time would test and develop hers.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A QUEEN AND HER GUEST.

THE hours passed swiftly to Latimer. In such society a month would have seemed but a day, and an hour went away with startling rapidity. Consequently, the afternoon was half spent when Latimer approached a subject he deemed important. He had decided, before coming, to demand—that is the word: to demand—an answer to one question; but he approached it without a very severe air.

"Now that friendship is established between us, and I am hiding the fact from my uncle, is it more than fair I should have your confidence more fully? There is enmity between you and Abbott Woodbank—why?"

Her face clouded in an instant.

"Isn't this matter better left untouched?"

"No. An explanation from you may serve to cement our friendship beyond the power of breaking. Pardon me, but I think in the majority of cases the one who makes the first statement controls the mind of an auditor."

Tiger-Lily looked seriously troubled.

"Remember, Mr. Woodbank is your uncle—"

"I remember he is not. As I have told you before, his sister was but my step-mother. I call him so only because taught to do so. You can speak freely."

"I wish I could!" she exclaimed.

"What is to hinder you?"

"A promise to reveal the truth to no one until—"

"You have had justice?"

"Yes."

"Some promises are better broken than kept."

"But not this one. Mr. Latimer, do not urge me to tell; for, believe me, I have urgent reasons for remaining silent a while longer. When I can tell any one, you shall know. Until then, let me be Tiger-Lily—the mysterious—the unknown."

"Unknown? Yes; that too. I do not even know your real name."

His dissatisfaction was so evident that she hesitated for a moment, and then slowly said:

"If I tell one name will that suffice?"

"If such is your will."

"The name is—Florence."

He repeated it slowly, finding in it a music never observed before; but he could not keep his thoughts or tongue from the subject uppermost in his mind, as she easily saw.

"I am aware it is asking a good deal of you to trust my word against that of Abbott Woodbank. Men say he is strictly honorable, and he is rich and of a proud old family. I am a queen of outlaws, with no known record except that of crime. At least, that is what people say, though if I live I will one day prove that there is less crime at my door than is charged against me. But I ask you to believe in me against Abbott Woodbank's record; I ask you to believe, and give no reason why you should, except my mere word."

"True," he said eagerly; "and that is why I ask you to tell what cause you have for hating Woodbank."

She shook her head slowly.

"I cannot do that, and yet I am disposed to relate a little of my life that you may see what kind of a man Woodbank is. Shall I speak?"

"Shall you? Am I not thirsting for a clew to the past?"

She did not answer, and the hand which rested on the arm of her chair was far from being steady. Perhaps she was looking back into that dark past which would never grow dim, or it may be she was coining a story calculated to win and deceive him.

"Years ago," she finally began, "I started across the Texas prairies to seek justice at the hands of Abbott Woodbank. The wrong he has done originally began with a member of my family older than myself, and I was seeking redress. I was a mere child, as I may say, at the time, and my only real protector was a young man of less than twenty; but he was brave and true, and I had a sort of courage if it was uncultivated."

"One night we halted, as usual, on the prairie. We were with some emigrants seeking a home in the Far West, and I suppose they took the usual precautions to guard against trouble; but I remember having a presentiment of danger and mentioning it to Neal—to my young friend, before mentioned. Yet I was weary and fell asleep as usual."

"I was awakened by loud yells—the war-whoops of the Comanches. I hastily left the wagon. The red fiends were galloping back and forth, slaying all the emigrants, but I noticed even then that a white man was at their head. I fled, and, somehow, passed the circle of slaughter, but there my strength failed and I dropped to the ground. From the tall grass I saw the last of that red drama; the last of the emigrants was slain. I saw Neal battle bravely for his life, but it was in vain. He fell, covered with wounds."

"Then the white leader showed his real purpose. He declared, with a Spanish oath, that 'the girl' who was the cause of the attack had escaped. His red fiends were ordered to search the grass. Danger gave me fresh strength. I was beyond the red light of the burning wagons and I arose and fled. I was not seen and I went out into the night, on a wild and trackless prairie, like a deer fleeing from open mouthed hounds."

"I was not seen, but I heard my pursuers behind me and ran at full speed. At times I tripped and nearly fell over the tangled grass. But, child that I was and unaccustomed to such scenes, I went on, on, on—until breath failed me and I dropped breathless, panting, exhausted to the ground, my brain nearly turned by the horror of the night."

She had spoken rapidly, feverishly, and Latimer listened with a dull pain at his own heart. As she paused, shiveringly, he laid his hand upon her own, but she scarcely seemed to feel the touch. She was silent, but her face was eloquent.

"And then?" questioned the Virginian, gently.

"Then came white men who took me in charge. They were wild and lawless of look, but the leader, whose hair was gray, was as kind as though I had been his own daughter. He said they were Texan rangers, and though I had but a dim idea what he meant, I was glad to remain with them and receive the respectful kindness I did. They took me to a cabin in a wood, where their 'housekeeper,' the same middle-aged woman now with me, made me welcome."

"There I remained. True, I had started to find Abbott Woodbank and demand justice, but my blood seemed chilled by the events of that night of horror and the peace of the cabin was like a vision of Paradise. For weeks I remained at the cabin. The men were away much of the time, and when they were at home they were very kind, and playfully called me their 'Queen.' Their leader, a grave, gloomy-faced man, was like a father."

"A year passed before I knew the truth. Then King Leopard, as the leader was called, was

brought home sorely wounded. He died within a week. Before the end came I knew all. The band, whom I had believed honest, were mere outlaws, men who lived by plundering their fellow-creatures. King Leopard had led them, but he told me a tale of his wrongs which made me love the man, even while his crimes caused a shudder. Base wrongs had driven him to crime—but that story would not interest you; let it remain buried in his grave."

"He told me more. He had discovered the identity of the white man who led the assassins on the wagon-train. He was Pedro Lopez, the overseer of Abbott Woodbank, and his employer had sent him to murder me. More than this King Leopard said. He advised me to take command of the Vultures, as they were anxious I should do, as their queen, and settle near Woodbank and recover my rights. He told me of this refuge, and, in brief, when he was dead we did come here and. Tiger-Lily became known to the world."

She ceased speaking and her head dropped on her hand. Her manner was one of utter weariness and sorrow, as though her battle with life had been one which consumed like fire and left only ashes.

What Walter Latimer said to express his sympathy he never really knew. Enough that he did express it. He did not think of doubting her veracity, and he said as much; but when he suggested the possibility that Woodbank might not be so guilty as she believed, she rejected the idea quickly.

"Some day I will show you there is not a doubt of his guilt, but do not ask me to say more now. I wish, too, that you could believe I am seeking for justice rather than revenge. I regard it as such. And, oh! if you knew the horror of that night on the prairie; the red light of the burning wagons; the yelling Comanches galloping about like unchained fiends; the sickening thuds of their murderous blows and the mangled bodies lying on the ground and trampled under their horses' feet; the knowledge that I was the one sought by this ruthless attack, and the subsequent wild, aimless, frantic, breathless flight from the butchers; if you realized the terror of that night you would not wonder that I hate Abbott Woodbank!"

She ceased, and with her face buried in her hands, shivered afresh. And Latimer, thrilled through and through, no longer doubted. Believing, he would almost have taken weapons then, had she suggested it, and gone forth with the Texas Vultures to seek justice at Woodbank's house.

The visit was ended; a visit during which there were no lulls in conversation unless they were as eloquent as words. We lack the space to tell one-half that was said, but it was an epoch in Latimer's life he could never forget, and it seemed likely to be no less than the first of many visits.

For the Virginian's last doubt had vanished. The story she had told, the manner of telling, her refined, womanly ways, and the charm of her presence—all combined had convinced Latimer.

Outlaw queen she might be, but bitter wrongs had driven her to the life, and she was far more to be pitied than censured.

And with the chivalry of his Virginian nature, he was ready to enlist under her banner, and fight for her as the knights of olden days fought for their "lady fair."

As for Abbott Woodbank, he would go back to his house, since Tiger Lily requested it, but he would go knowing he was a crime-stained man, who had driven an innocent girl along a dark and dubious road.

Justly or not, for weal or woe, the young man took his position. What the future would bring forth no man could tell.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CAPTAIN SCORPION SHOWS HIS HAND.

It was necessary that Latimer should leave the chaparral at a seasonable hour if he would avoid arousing the suspicions of the family at Woodbank house; for invalids are not supposed to make all-day wanderings without telling where they have been.

When the hour for parting came, Tiger-Lily touched the bell-cord, and The Honest Flea soon appeared. It was the first time the two men had met since the latter delivered up Walter's watch, and then coolly stole it back.

They looked at each other, now, in silence for a moment. A sly look of recognition was on the honest man's face, and Latimer smiled. He knew the fellow deserved a throttling, but as matters had progressed he could only treat the matter as a joke.

"So we meet again," he observed.

"As you see, yer honor. I hopes ez how you're well, yer honor, an' I'm glad ter see you hyar."

"Why so? I've left my watch behind."

"Zat makes no difference. An ole, familiar face is always welcome, an' you an' me hev met afore, yer honor."

"I remember it distinctly. I suppose you are as honest as ever!"

"I am, sir. Honesty was my birthright, ez much as z-er breath I draw'r, sir. I am proud to z-ey my comrades call me Zer Honest Flea."

"I think I perceive a hidden meaning in the *sobriquet*, and am prepared to believe that when you approach, *the honest people flee!* Yet, Honest Flea, I bear you no ill-will and we will not dispute."

Latimer stepped away to give place to 'Tiger-Lily.

"Has Captain Scorpion returned?"

"He has, worthy Queen."

"Send him here, then."

The captain soon came; a short, thick-set man, with long arms, and shoulders like an ox; a huge head, bushy beard, coarse, brutal features; a sullen knave, if Latimer was any judge.

"I wish you to conduct this gentleman to the east side of the chaparral," Tiger-Lily directed.

Scorpion looked at Latimer in surly silence.

"Make the journey before dark, if possible," the Queen added; "and then return here. I rely on you to be faithful in this, sir, and you shall not go unrewarded."

The small, furtive eyes turned to her face.

"Have you ever knowed me to be wantin' in good faith?"

"Never," replied Tiger-Lily; "and that is why I select you. I want a man for the work I can trust."

Something like a scornful smile parted the outlaw's lips, but he saluted with seeming respect, and no more remained to be said on that score.

A plain, practical farewell took place between the Virginian and Tiger-Lily, and then the former followed his guide and the cave was left behind. Scorpion made no delay, but plunged into the bushes, and Walter promptly followed.

Not a word was spoken after leaving the cave until they had gone a hundred yards, and Scorpion's manner continued surly and unpleasant; but Walter was in too good spirits to let the journey pass in silence.

"You lead a free, merry life here in the wood," he observed.

"Wah!" grunted Scorpion.

"I don't suppose you would change it for any other?"

"Wah!"

"Were you born in Texas?"

"Wah!"

"See here!" exclaimed Latimer; "couldn't you say anything more than that hybrid monosyllable? whatever it means. I like sociability on the road."

"Ther silent tongue seldom gets bit," said the outlaw, coolly. "I've see'd more years o' life than you, young man, an' it's my experience that ther best way ter sail along easy an' successful is ter keep a still tongue, an' meddle with nobody's business but a fellow's own."

The rebuff was too pointed to be misunderstood.

"My dear sir," said Latimer, coolly, "if you imagine I want to associate myself with you, you make the biggest mistake of your lifetime. I would as soon take a bull-dog for a partner."

"Glad you think so!" growled Scorpion; "an' now we understand each other we needn't say nothin' more."

Latimer did not reply. He would have enjoyed taking the fellow to task for his bearish ways, but as the Vulture Queen's second in command he was entitled to good usage whether he gave it in return or not.

They went on without delay and the Virginian knew were following the same path by which he had come, but the sun was well down in the west and the way was darker than before. His thoughts had a tendency to wander to Tiger Lily, but he did not trust his guide any too much and he tried to keep his mind on the present and guard against traps by the way.

Proof was soon given that his estimate of Scorpion was correct.

Perhaps half the distance had been traveled when that man suddenly halted where the path widened to a small glade and faced Latimer. Even then the latter saw an ugly look on his surly face and his small eyes had an evil twinkle. He allowed the breech of his rifle to drop to the ground with a heavy thud.

"I've got summut ter say!" he observed.

"The blazes you have! Well, fire away!"

"I've been axed in yer h'arin' ter guide you through ther bush, an' I've been axed when you didn't h'ar it, ter leave ye by ther way. Critter, you hev made yourself too much a central figger sence you showed up around Thornpath Chaparral. That nose o' yours ain't overly long, but it hez a durned chronic habit o' gettin' inter other folks's business. Durn yer carcass! why can't yer let ther Texas Vultures alone?"

The words were severe and aggressive, but they did not express one-half of the surly hatred visible in his face—the face of a desperate ruffian, and, beyond a doubt, a clear index of his nature.

Latimer saw all this and read the danger ahead. He remembered Jarl Belvin's assertion that Scorpion had led the gang that attacked and nearly killed him by the bank, and as all these thoughts flashed through his mind he foresaw another encounter.

But, this time, unless men were ambushed by the glade, it would be man to man and the Virginian resolved to give a good account of himself. He did not fear the swaggering ruffian, and as indignation thrilled him through and through, he drew himself erect and faced him with dilated nostrils and a hostile light in his eyes.

"When I have done you harm it will be time to ask the question," he retorted. "Until then, take your own maxim for a guide and—mind your own business!"

"My business jest now is ter look out fur you, critter; to take you down a peg. An' I'm goin' ter do it!"

"How?"

"Jest ez you say. Knife, revolver or bar' muscle. I'll give ye an even chance, an' ther man who turns up his toes won't lie unburied long. Ther jaguars an' wolves will car' fur what is eatable."

"Just so, my fine fellow. Well, I agree with you. We will fight, if you say so, and when I meet Tiger-Lily I will tell her not to regret Captain Scorpion, since he was a mere ruffian and a traitor to the band. I begin to understand you at last, my man. You have played your green false and, probably, aspire to take the lead of the band out of her hands. More than that, you once led a band of assassins against me in this chaparral. I have wounds on my head I owe to you; I intend to pay the debt, now!"

"You're too dang'rous ter live," said Scorpion, his evil face dark with hatred; "an' I swar you shan't live. Strip, critter, strip; an' I'll make food fur ther wolves!"

He cast his rifle aside and his more cumbersome garments followed. Latimer more moderately followed his example. Standing thus the contrast in their persons was marked, Scorpion being far broader across the chest and shoulders. Yet, the Virginian had a good, compact form, and he had that which is worth more than mere brute strength—a very thorough knowledge of the art of self-defense.

Knowing this, he was never cooler in his life than then.

They faced each other and Scorpion led off with a blow meant for the other's head, but, somehow, it went over his shoulder instead. Twice more the fellow struck, and twice had he failed to get in a blow.

By that time Latimer believed he had him measured, and found to be a mere novice, and he gave him a stinging blow on the cheeks which, by some mischance, Scorpion did not see until it hit.

As this is not an essay on prize-fighting we need not follow the battle in detail. Enough to say that the younger man's skill enabled him to ward off every blow, while Scorpion was soon in an unenviable plight. There was blood on his face and shirt, and his eyes were closing, and only his brute pluck had kept him up so long.

As he arose after being knocked down for a wind up to the tenth round, there was an ugly twinkle in what was left of his evil eyes; and with a snarl he rushed for his revolvers, which still lay on the grass.

Latimer saw his purpose and followed him sharply. As a revolver came up a blow on his arm sent it spinning away to the bushes; and then a second stroke, straight out from the shoulder, caught the outlaw under the jawbone and with a rustling of leaves, he disappeared from view.

He had been knocked out of the glade.

The victor heard him scramble to his feet, but he did not re-enter the glade. Instead, his footsteps were heard in rapid retreat, and the inference was easily drawn.

"Wal did, by thunder! You've cut his comb closest!"

Latimer wheeled abruptly as he heard the words, but there was no occasion for alarm. The Texas Chick stood before him, his dirt-covered face broadened by a beaming smile.

The men had not met since Zeb found the Virginian nearly dead in the forest, and now their hands clasped in a friendly way.

"I'm glad to see you here," Latimer declared.

"Pick up yer feathers an' you'll see me git onto it on ther wing. Ef that durned Vulture knows any way ter wipe ye out, he'll do it; an' whar is thar a better place for 't than hyar?"

There was wisdom in what he said, and after securing all the weapons, including Scorpion's, they hastened away.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A JEALOUS WOMAN.

THE Texas Chick seemed to have improved his knowledge of the chaparral, for he led the way along the obscure path almost as well as Scorpion had done. Now and then, where it was the most difficult, he paused for a moment, but the right way was ultimately found.

Few words passed between them, for the noise of the bushes made conversation impracticable, and they did not pause until the chaparral was passed.

Then Latimer opened conversation.

"I have a good deal to say to you, Zeb."

"I kin reciprocate. Fu'st o' all, I must say I admire ther way you went through Cap'n Scorpion. What begun it? How did ye happen on him? Do ye know, I've been in ther cave o' ther Texas Vultures? An' I know fur sartin they're ther counterfeiters now; I see'd signs on it thar, an' my still-hunt is likely ter bring me in dollars an' cents. Yas, I've been thar, an' I assure ye Tiger-Lily giv me a warm welcome. She jest did! She shet me up in a hole in ther cave an' sot a jaguar on me, an' when they found his claws wouldn't go through my feathers, they tuk ter shootin' at me an' lead flew free. Ef I had been a s'ring-chicken nuthin' could hev saved me, but bein' sech a tough ole rooster, I come through with my comb uncut!"

Zeb poured out this long address so rapidly that Latimer could not interrupt him, and wholly unconscious that his charges against the Vulture Queen were so many blows to the Virginian. When the latter gained a chance he used it well and managed to get the whole story of Zeb's adventure at the cave.

It was told with exact veracity, except that his "proof" that the Vultures were counterfeiters was a little weak, and he threw all the blame on Tiger-Lily without being able to connect her with the affair.

"That's all right," said Latimer, "but I tell you the Vulture Queen is innocent. She is not capable of such a deal."

Zeb stared in amazement.

"Durnation beetles!—you say that arter she pummeled you inter beef-steak?"

"She had no hand in that deed, Zeb, as I—"

"Didn't we find her keerd on yer corpse, a-jeerin' at ye? An' didn't ye jest rise up on yer hind legs an' howl fur gore when ye read it? Strikes me somebody 'bout yer diameter an' circumference said: 'Lead ther way, Zeb. We'll hunt that infernous woman down ez a blood-hound tracks ets prey. Lead ther way, Zeb; lead ther way!'"

Latimer smiled faintly for a moment.

"Zeb, I believe you are an honest man, and one who would not willingly betray a confidence reposed in you."

"I hope I am all o' that," the Texan said, more seriously than usual.

"Then I will confide in you. I, too, have been in the Vultures' cave; I have to-day been Tiger-Lily's guest."

Zeb started back. His eyes became unnaturally large; his face twisted into an expression of profound amazement; his lower jaw fell; and he looked like a man who had been struck by something which left him whole only because he hadn't time to fall in pieces.

"Durnation beetles!"

He muttered the words stupidly, but Latimer took him in hand, and, without revealing the fact that Tiger Lily had been at Woodbank's house at all, gave him to understand that a friendship had been cemented between them, that he had that day been her guest and that he did not believe her half so bad as report made her.

Zeb listened and made no rough interruptions, but there was a shadow on his face which told of real regret; and when his turn came he gave his opinion of the Vulture Queen hesitatingly.

She was a brilliant, handsome woman, with a way of attracting people; but though she might have been driven to crime previously by wrongs, she now followed it of her own free will. He also believed she was to blame for the attack on him at the cave, and for Scorpion's last exploit. Certainly, both that outlaw and The Flea were her trusted tools, and if they were playing her false her hold on the band seemed weak.

Latimer combated this idea and placed all the blame at Scorpion's door. If he did not convince, he silenced, his companion, and when they parted Zeb had agreed to do nothing rash, but to adhere to the league formed between them before.

And the Virginian felt that he was to be trusted.

The latter pushed on toward Woodbank's. It was two hours after nightfall when he arrived, and he found his so-called uncle and Constance worrying about him, while Randal was out making a search.

Walter felt extremely mean as he told a fictitious story to account for his prolonged absence, in which the Texas Chick came in as his entertainer. Whether Abbott Woodbank was guilty or not, the double part he had to act irritated his honorable nature and he felt mean enough to order his horse and ride away never to return.

But he did nothing of the kind, and they did not doubt the story he had told.

It was two hours later and all the family seemed to have retired except Abbott Woodbank. The latter sat in a chair at his table, moodily gazing at the flickering blaze of his lamp, the greater part of the time, but now and then turning toward the window.

Anon, there was a tap there and he quickly arose, went forward and admitted Pedro Lopez.

"I thought you would never come," he said, impatiently.

The Mexican walked to the mantle, poured out and drank a sizable dose of brandy and then dropped heavily into a chair. He looked weary and angry.

"Have you failed?" Woodbank anxiously asked.

"Yes," Lopez irritably replied. "It is the devil's own luck. I have fooled away the whole day, and the only result is that I know the bogus money has disappeared completely."

"I doubt Brandley's faithfulness, and you will remember I have always said you should go with the money, yourself, when we send it off, for—"

"Oh! I know your old foggy ideas," Lopez rudely interrupted. "I've tested him years ago and know he's true. There can be no doubt but the money was lost just as he said. The questions are, Who cut it loose from the pack-horse and where is it now?"

"I don't know," said Woodbank, helplessly.

"Of course you don't. Caramba! you are as lifeless as a lump of clay in an emergency. But for me our counterfeiting operations would have been discovered long ago."

"But for you they would never have been begun."

"There! don't begin to whine repentance again; you make me sick. See here, old man, I want you to send that Latimer flying when he's able to travel, and that'll be very soon. Pack him off to Virginia."

"But I can't do that—"

"You shall do it!" the Mexican declared, an ugly look on his face. "I know your game; you aspire to marry Constance to him; but it won't work. I take Constance, and Latimer goes back to Virginia or—"

A significant pause ended the threat.

Woodbank fumbled nervously at one of his coat-buttons. Bad he might be, but he was not equal to Lopez. He would gladly have sent the latter off instead of the Virginian, but he dared not. He was in his power and he was a hard master.

Consequently, he had to agree to all Lopez proposed. When Latimer was able to travel, some way should be devised to make him tired of Texas, and once gone, Constance was to be set free to face with the fact that she was to be the Mexican's wife.

It was a hard thing to agree to, for if Woodbank had one redeeming quality it was parental affection, but he was fast in the coils and what he then suffered was only the recoil of his own sins.

Lopez left him as secretly as he had come, but as he was leaving the piazza he was met by Constance, herself.

"You here?"

"Yes," replied the girl, steadily. "I saw you come in and am curious to know what brought you here. You seem to have a good deal of secret business with my father, and I cannot help thinking an evil spell hangs about it all. What brought you here, to-night?"

A peculiar light shone in Pedro's eyes, but the darkness hid it. He had wanted to see Miss Woodbank and the unexpected encounter was most opportune.

He knew she had not played the listener and drew her to one side.

"I have promised Senor Woodbank not to mention the matter to any one, and if I confide in you, you must solemnly promise not to betray to him the fact that I have told you."

"I promise," Constance readily replied.

"Very well. I have left your father in deep distress because I have given him proof that his nephew is not the honorable man he thought him; that he has betrayed him to his enemies; that he has engaged in a wicked love; that, in brief, he has made the acquaintance of Tiger-Lily, and though knowing her to be Senor Woodbank's deadly enemy, has allied himself with her against your father, and is her favored lover!"

The trap was cunningly sprung.

Constance started back with a stifled cry.

"What?"

"It is but too true, senorita. He is her lover; he visits her in her cave; he is setting her high above his honest friends!"

Constance grasped his arm tightly. For years she had generally been thought of a lovable nature; few save Lopez had detected the claws 'neath the velvet; but in one moment she was turned from an angel to a demon, so far as her manner went. She loved Walter Latimer, and the knowledge that he cared for another was like a blistering coal of fire.

Lopez had calculated well.

"Is this true?" she asked in a husky whisper.

"It is, senorita; I swear it!"

"Then," she added, in the former tone,

"Tiger-Lily dies!"

Lopez smiled triumphantly; his scheme was working well.

"My sympathies are with you, Senorita Woodbank," he said, with assumed gravity, "and I will help you in your work. But, perhaps you would like to see this bold woman and talk with her. Or, perhaps, you have no curiosity?"

Cunning, again. What woman has no curiosity regarding her rival?
Constance stamped her foot; it was answer enough!

"Very well," added Lopez. "We will lure this Tiger-Lily from her lair, you shall meet her, and then—we shall see!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

TIGER LILY ENTERS A TRAP.

The Vulture Queen did not see Captain Scorpion again that night, but in the morning he appeared with his face covered with patches and said they were to cover wounds received in an encounter with Woodbank's rancheros.

He had used curatives with such an effect that the swelling and discoloration had nearly disappeared, and as he laughed at his injuries the subject was soon dropped and only counted as one more clause in the long list against the ranch-owner.

That afternoon The Honest Flea came to Tiger-Lily and handed her a folded note.

"I see'd a young man you know on in a chaparral an' he giv' me this," he explained.

Tiger-Lily tore the paper open and read as follows:

"RESPECTED QUEEN:—On my return to Woodbank's house last night I learned something so strange, startling and unexpected that I must see you without delay. If I had a doubt of your nobility before it is gone now. But the discovery leaves me stunned and confused, and I ask myself if Abbott Woodbank can be the man I once knew in Virginia. He is, and yet, how changed! I must see you without delay. Meet me to-morrow evening under the great tree by the chaparral's edge, at 8 o'clock. Do not fail me! I did not think to see you so soon, but no one knows what a day will bring forth.

"Your sincere friend,
"WALTER LATIMER."

The queen sent her man away, read the note several times over, grew grave, and ended by sending for The Flea again. All seemed right and reasonable, but she felt a trifle uneasy in spite of that.

So, when The Flea came, she questioned him as to the meeting with Latimer. He answered promptly, and with an appearance of frankness, and her last doubt vanished. The Virginian had written to have her meet him, and she was far from wishing to disappoint him.

The afternoon wore on and twilight approached. Then she prepared to depart. She had decided to take one man only with her, and The Flea was naturally selected.

They left the cave, and taking the shortest path, hastened toward the place of rendezvous. The chaparral was very dark, but they knew the way well, and both were thoroughly armed. Years of experience in her wild life had made the Vulture Queen as brave as a man.

When they arrived at the place of meeting no other person was on the ground, and Tiger-Lily rightly judged they were ahead of time. She stood under the giant tree while The Flea wandered idly away and soon ceased to make himself heard.

Tiger-Lily had not waited long when there was a sound of footsteps at one side and she turned quickly. A dark form was approaching, and the shadows were so heavy under the overhanging branches, that she did not suspect it was not Latimer until it came close and she saw the outlines of a female form.

She looked closely and in surprise, failing to discover who it was.

Perhaps the eyes of the other woman were sharpened by hatred, for her voice arose without hesitation, and sharply pitched:

"So you are waiting for your lover, my fine outlaw?"

It was an unexpected greeting, but Tiger-Lily was not one of the kind to be unnerved. She faced the new-comer steadily, and recognized Constance Woodbank, but she did not reply.

She wondered why the lady of Woodbank house was there at such an hour, and resolved to know before answering.

"So you don't answer? One would think you would lift your siren voice, and say: 'I am here to meet Walter Latimer, a noble gentleman, and—my lover!'"

"Whoever thinks so is mistaken as you see, Miss Woodbank. Further than this, it is not so strange to see me abroad by night, as to see Miss Woodbank."

"You are right!" Constance retorted. "Night is the time for such deeds as yours; night is the time for such a love!"

Suppressed passion and hatred made the speaker's voice husky and unnatural. She longed to throw herself on her rival and destroy the beauty of the face which had won Latimer. In her pocket was a revolver, given her by Lopez, but she forgot it then. And in any case her ready hands were more fitted for an outlet to her venom than a firearm.

"Pardon me," returned Tiger-Lily calmly, and watching her closely, "but you do not know about what you are talking. Draw back your skirts, Miss Woodbank, and avoid contamination by touching one so evil as you represent me."

"Be sure I shall not touch you in love!"

"I sincerely hope not."

"How dare you address me thus?"

"I am not aware that it requires any particular courage; but as this conversation is worse than useless, I think it had better be dropped. If you have business with me, Miss Woodbank, I will listen."

Constance felt that she was scarcely holding her own, and endeavored to imitate her rival's calmness.

"I have business, as I will convince you. I want to know by what right you, an outlaw queen, dare to fascinate an honorable gentleman like Walter Latimer?"

"It would require a long answer to cover the ground fully. Beginning by denying any fascination, I might also ask by what right you question me; and it would not be out of place to intimate that Mr. Latimer is old enough to choose for himself, and—"

"Such an answer will not do!" Interrupted Constance, with a stamp of her foot. "You talk like a lawyer. Stop it! I demand that you speak like a woman!"

"And copy from you, Miss Woodbank?"

"Such a thing is impossible."

"I hope so, if it is womanly fashion to use such bitter words."

"You shall not turn me from my purpose," Constance declared, with another attempt at calmness. "You came here to meet Walter Latimer."

"Allow me to ask how you know?"

"I know because I wrote the letter which brought you here."

"Indeed! Are you Mr. Latimer's amanuensis?"

"He had nothing to do with it; he knows nothing about it. I had learned of your infamous conduct in entrapping an honorable man, and took this way to see you."

"In plain words, you committed a forgery."

"Call it what you will; Walter Latimer is my cousin, and I will save him from an adventure."

Tiger-Lily was thinking rapidly. She realized that the Virginian knew nothing of the note; that she had been decoyed by her enemies; and it was also clear that The Flea was in the plot, since he had stated that he met Latimer and received the note from his own hands.

Double treachery was on foot, but the Vulture Queen prepared to meet it and kept her hand on her revolver, watching for possible allies of her rival.

"Allow me to ask how you received the wonderful news that I know Mr. Latimer so well?"

"I know you have met him secretly—"

"Do you remember that 'tis said I nearly assassinated him?"

"I don't understand that and won't try to," Constance declared. "Enough that you have met and dazzled him; that you have received him as a visitor—nay, a lover—at your cave."

"Prove that if you can!"

"Do you deny it?"

"The proof lies with you."

"Proof I care nothing for; I know whereof I speak and that is enough. I say you, you, an outlaw, have fascinated him with your fiendish arts and I demand that you give him up!"

"Because he is your cousin?"

"Because he is an honorable man."

"Speak plainly, Miss Woodbank. You love Walter Latimer and are not disposed to tolerate a rival. Ah! well, why should you fear? Is it likely the 'honorable gentleman' would think seriously of the woman outlaw?"

Again Constance stamped her foot.

"I demand that you give him up!"

"I cannot give up what I do not possess."

Constance tried to speak, but her voice failed her. She was trembling with passion, and wholly unfit to meet the even calmness of the woman she saw fit to term her rival. But dark thoughts were in the mind of the heiress, and one hand clasped a keen knife beneath her wrapper with a tenacious hold at variance with the almost palsied trembling of its companion. Lopez had armed her well, and she was resolved that Tiger-Lily should not go away alive.

And this was the girl Latimer had thought refined, tender and gentle!

"Beware!" she managed to say, at last, but her voice was merely a whisper.

"Of what? Of whom?"

"Of me!" the jealous woman retorted. "You have defied the men of Texas, perhaps because they were your guilty allies, but woman's crime and perfidy shall meet with destruction when another woman takes the trail!"

Something like pity came over the Vulture Queen.

"Let us not quarrel," she said, gently. "I assure you I have used no arts to win Mr. Latimer; I even deny that I have won him; and if you are troubled by the belief that it is so, I am sincerely sorry."

And still again Constance stamped upon the ground, as though to grind her rival's heart into the unfeeling sod.

"You dare to pity me—you?" she hissed.

"I am a woman; our sex is the same. Why should we be enemies?" Tiger-Lily kindly asked.

"I'll tell you why! Because you have stolen

the man I love; because you are base, false, degraded; and because you have done all this I pay you—o!"

At the last word the ready knife was drawn with a jerk and, springing forward, she struck with full force at Tiger-Lily's bosom. It was a maddened stroke, but to her surprise her hand was caught, the knife wrested away and flung into the bushes.

"Curb your passion!" the Vulture Queen coldly said.

"Not so fast, my lady; I am here, too!"

Tiger-Lily wheeled at the mocking voice; Pedro Lopez stood before her.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE RESULT OF PEDRO'S INTERFERENCE.

THE coming of the Mexican was an event well calculated to startle Tiger-Lily. She knew him to be her bitterest living foe; years before he had sought her life with bloodthirsty Comanches at his head; and had only spared her of late because Woodbank so commanded and because, like other men, he had found her as hard to catch as a will-o'-the-wisp.

Now, it was clear he had come as the ally, assistant and backer of Constance, and there could be no doubt as to his position in the drama.

Yet, the Vulture Queen faced him unwaveringly her hand resting on her revolver. She had no part of the brazen courage of an Amazon, but years of wild life, and companionship with misfortune, had taught her to care for herself.

"You are not to have this scene to yourselves," Pedro added, with a cold sneer. "I am here!"

"Wolves always gather where they think there is a feast!" Tiger-Lily promptly answered.

"Call me so if you will; you will find me an enemy, in any case."

"I know your way. I learned it years ago when you were a leader of Comanches and guided them to the slaughter of women and children."

"Carajo! you have a long tongue."

"I know how to deal with such as you."

"I can say the same," returned Lopez, viciously. "My unwomanly queen of outlaws, you are at last at the judgment-seat. Your race is run, and I will see that you get your deserts. I hold your life in the hollow of my hand. Call for help, if you will, and see the result. Perhaps The Flea will come to your aid—perhaps! Tiger-Lily, you are mine!"

He spoke mockingly, with all the base exultation of a low nature which finds one weaker than itself in its power.

He looked at Tiger-Lily with evil, twinkling, malignant eyes. He knew as little of mercy as the chaparral jaguar.

Constance stood by, her bosom heaving with passion, nervous excitement, and the late brief trial of strength. Her purpose did not waver; knowing Lopez was her ready tool, she was resolved to use no mercy—her silence arose merely from an internal war of emotions which she could not subdue.

Tiger-Lily knew her danger, but she was the calmest of the three. She had weapons and knew how to use them; and though she did not wish Pedro Lopez to die that night, she was resolved to shoot to kill, if necessary.

If no more enemies were near she had no fear.

She placed her back to the chaparral and faced them steadily.

Lopez advanced a step.

"Stand back!" she commanded; "I have a revolver."

"Surrender, and go with me to Woodbank's house," he said, but not without balking.

"And be assassinated on the way? No; I know you too well. I will not surrender, and if you attempt to so much as touch me I will fire. I never miss!"

"Beware!" he cried.

"Just what I am doing!"

"I will make you shed tears of blood for this. You cannot escape me, and if you delay longer, you be to you when I do lay hands on you—you will wish yourself dead!"

It was an ugly threat, but hardly had it passed his lips when there was a sharp crack, and the Mexican staggered back from a flat-headed blow which nearly knocked him off his feet—a blow delivered by a new-comer on the scene.

Lopez regained his balance and started for him who had dealt the slap, but the cold muzzle of a revolver was thrust almost into his eyes.

"Keep your distance, you cowardly hound, or I'll shoot you as I would a wolf!"

It was the voice of Walter Latimer.

Another man strode to his side.

"An' byar be I with ev'ry feather on ther fight!"

The Texas Chick was the speaker.

Tiger-Lily flushed with joy; she knew what the new arrivals meant; she knew she was saved.

"Contemptible brute!" continued Latimer, looking at Lopez with withering scorn; "I do not know of words fit to express my opinion of you. I can only wonder that such a low, base, groveling wretch was ever endowed with the form and reason of a man!"

"In this hyar way you'll find us roosters 'round when ther hawks is arter ther chicks," added Zeb, coolly. "You had better keep off ther roost."

Lopez recovered from the first shock of his surprise and faced Latimer, but he was mad with rage.

"Carajo! I will have your life!" he cried.

"Not at present," the Virginian calmly answered. "My revolver covers your head, and if you try to make further trouble I shall fire!"

"Mil demonios! you struck me!"

"Sarved you right, by thunder!" interpolated Zeb.

"No man can insult me thus and live. I exact a life for a blow. I will kill you!"

"There is time enough for this anon, and you will find me ready to give you a chance. A Virginian never refuses it. Shall I consider myself formally challenged?"

"Dog of an American, yes! Meet me if you dare; Randal Woodbank will be my second."

"You never made a greater mistake in your life!"

Still another man strode forth from the gloom, as he spoke, and all recognized the younger Woodbank.

"I will not be your second," he added. "I scorn to ally myself with so contemptible a cur. Constance, you had better have died before this night's work was done."

The brother's voice rung out sternly, and the jealous woman cowered with consternation, though not with repentance. The hatred was in her heart, and she would have struck Tiger-Lily, even then, if she could, but it shamed her to have her brother see her in such a light.

"Latimer," Randal continued, "I beg your pardon, but I followed you here to-night because I wondered what work you and the Texas Chick had on hand. I begin to see clearly. For Tiger Lily I have no friendship, and I regret the fact that you have; but I thoroughly condemn the trick which ured her here. I fear if you had not learned of it a deed would have been done to-night which would have placed a ghastly stain on the honor of a lady of the Woodbank family."

"You do not know, hot-headed fool—" began Lopez; but Randal interrupted him.

"Peace! I will not bear your serpent voice!"

"Fair words!" snarled the Mexican. "Remember, Randal Woodbank, that I can tell that which will place yet a deeper stain on your name and that of your baughty father. Let me say to the world that—"

"Silence!" thundered Randal, advancing a step. "Keep your tongue between your teeth or I will silence it forever!"

If murder ever ran riot within a man it was so with Lopez then. His bad, hot blood was aroused and would have hesitated at no crime, but he saw the odds terribly against him and resolved to yield that he might gain power to strike with the chances in his favor.

By a powerful effort he gained a measure of calmness.

"I will not remain here to be insulted by such as you, but all here shall see me again. You, Latimer, I challenge to fight me to the death. You, Woodbank—"

"I will see you, anon: never fear."

"Enough! Miss Woodbank, let us go."

She started, but Randal stepped between them.

"No!" he said. "My sister cannot go in such company. I will be her escort; you, Lopez, can follow if you will. We had better leave the others. Latimer, think well of us if you can and, remember, Woodbank house will be open to you while I have a voice. Come, when you will, and we will see who is master there."

"Ay, that we will," said Lopez; "but I fancy the knowledge will not please you. Even's have reached a point where Pedro Lopez will show he is no dog. Hal hal we will see who is master at Woodbank. I go, now, but I leave my curse behind. I never forget and never forgive; you shall all weep for this night's work. Tiger-Lily, go back to your men, and may your reception give you joy. Hal hal May lightning blast you all! *Hasta manana!*"

At the last word he wheeled and strode after Randal and Constance. Only Tiger Lily, Latimer and Zeb were left on the ground.

The Virginian went to the Queen's side.

"I trust you have not sustained any injury," he said.

"None!" he answered, promptly, but in a voice deep with emotion. "And if I knew how to thank you, I would do it a score of times over. I am deeply grateful; I can say no more."

"It is enough, and it repays me as gold could not do," he said, taking her hand.

"I do not understand how you chanced here, however."

"Twas more than chance, as our friend shall explain."

"Yes," admitted the Texas Chick. "I had a finger in ther pie. Yerssee, I war loadin' round ther edge o' ther chaparral ter-day an' see'd Lopez g'n a note ter that durned critter you call Ther Honst Flea. I heard part o' ther talk, too, an' made out it was ter bring you ter a rendezvous; an' I dimly hatched out ther

fact that 'twas a sham. So I tole Walt, hyar, an' him an' me dropped 'round."

"The Flea is an infamous traitor!" Tiger Lily exclaimed.

"I am inclined to think he is not the only one in your band," Latimer added.

"Who else?" she asked, starting.

Even Zeb had lost his doubts, and they told their stories; Latimer telling of his fight with Captain Scorpion, and Zeb giving an account of his experience in the tunnel, with the jaguar and The Flea's rifle.

"I knew nothing of it!" said she, indignantly.

"Your disappearance from the cave was a mystery to me, though I supposed you had tired of it, and left of your own free will. So The Flea and Scorpion are traitors! I wonder how many others are with them?"

"Enough so that I fear for you if you return to the cave," said Latimer. "It becomes clear that Lopez, your worst enemy, controls The Flea, and it may be the same with Scorpion. And the latter may have supplanted you with the band; your return may be the signal for a general revolt, in which you will be seized, and be helpless among those rough men. Florence, you must not go back!"

The wise Texas Chick had fallen a little back when he saw Latimer take her hand, and the two now had the scene to themselves.

"What can I do?" Tiger-Lily asked, her mellow voice trembling. "I have nowhere else to go."

"Go with me! Place yourself under my protection, and I swear upon the honor of a gentleman you shall never regret it."

Side by side they stood, and such championship was dear to one who had so long been friendless. But, even then, she was just and generous.

"Remember who I am!" she murmured.

"The best of women! I say it, let others think as they will."

The Texas Chick had been strolling back, but as he saw how near each other they stood, he shook his head and went away.

"I reckon I ain't wanted in ther coop. Wal, wal, I ain't one o' ther old roosters that'll put hisself forrur fur a spring chicken!"

"But," Tiger-Lily was saying, "what will become of my battle for justice if I desert my men?"

"I will help you."

"I fear you will shrink from the first step."

"What is it?"

"To break into Abbott Woodbank's house!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

JARL'S ULTIMATUM—AN IMPORTANT PROJECT.

MOZA was alone that evening. The silence of the house was noticeable, and when she looked for the members of the family, no one except the elder Woodbank was to be found. Constance, Randal and Latimer were absent. There seemed to be no reason why this should cause second thought, but Moza was ill at ease and the air seemed full of the shadows of coming events.

She was indulging in these nervous fancies when a footstep sounded on the floor and she looked up to see Jarl Belvin. He was looking at her quietly, a faint smile parting his bearded lips.

"You here!" she exclaimed.

"As you see."

"You are terribly reckless. None of the family have retired, and if you are discovered—"

"I care nothing for them," he coldly answered. "I defy all, from the father to the son. I am about done with fighting from the bush, Moza, and I will make my enemies wish themselves a thousand miles away. Say no more! I have come to see Abbott Woodbank."

"He is in his private room."

"There I will go, then. Moza, girl, you are looking pale. You need have no fear; these wretches dare not harm you, while I am amply able to fight them arm to arm."

"It's wearing on me," she shivered.

"But the end is almost here; the deceit and danger nearly ended. In a few days you may throw down your implements of labor and these people shall know you as you are. I have had many talks with Abbott Woodbank, but I am now going to him to present my ultimatum. His fate will then be in his own hands."

"Be careful! For my sake, be careful!"

"I will; have no fear."

He pressed her hand and then strode to the room of the ranch-owner, pushing the door unceremoniously open and then entering in the same way and reclosing it.

Abbott Woodbank was sitting at his table. He looked up quickly, and then his face grew pale as he recognized his visitor.

"You!" he muttered.

"I!"

Jarl calmly sat down, placed his long rifle between his knees and let the barrel rest on his shoulder. Around it he clasped his brawny and hands looked coolly at the cowering wretch before him.

The ranch-owner had aged perceptibly in the last few days, but the pallor of his cheeks did not move the chaparral hermit to pity.

"What next will you do?" Woodbank uttered.

"Now you bring me right down to business and we will attend to it without delay. I believe you lately lost a sum of counterfeit money."

Woodbank brushed his hand across his perspiration-beaded forehead but made no reply.

"I have come to tell you where it is, which I can do the more readily since it was I who took it; who cut it loose from the pack-horse the night Brandley, or whatever his name was, tried to carry it away."

"I have suspected as much," groaned Woodbank.

"Shows your perspicacity, sir. You see, when I unexpectedly discovered that you were doing the counterfeiting, I wanted a specimen of what you turned out. I've got several bags-full. And now I've got it, I mean to make the most of it. I have you in the toils, Abbott Woodbank; a word from me, with the proof I can offer, will ruin you!"

The guilty man shivered perceptibly. He had sent off all his bogus money, and buried the utensils, after Jarl's invasion of the counterfeiting-den, hoping to destroy all evidence; but by securing the false coin Jarl had gained a fresh hold.

"Can't we compromise?" Woodbank humbly asked.

Jarl smiled coldly.

"We cannot! Did your tools offer a compromise when they swooped down on the wagon-train and butchered my Neal, my son? When I came upon the scene I knelt on the red sod and swore to be avenged. I have been long years on the trail, but my vendetta has never been warmer than when it seemed to sleep. Patiently, I have waited for the moment to strike and it is now here. In prison you can take your fill of repentance."

"In Heaven's name, have mercy!" the ranch-owner cried. "I am less to blame than you think. I was not with the men that massacred the train-people and your son; I did not lead nor send them, nor know of their purpose."

"Wait!" said Jarl, deeply. "Lopez, your ready tool, was sought by you when you knew Florence Riverton was on her way here with young Neal Belvin for a guide, and you told him what you would and asked him how they could be stopped. He replied that if you gave him full sway, he would see to it they never troubled you. You answered; 'Do as you will!' Lopez obeyed literally, marshaled the red Comanches, of whom he was once a degenerate white ally, and the slaughter was made. You, Abbott Woodbank, was a *particeps criminis* before, and after, the fact."

A haggard face looked whitely before his eyes.

"I have repented," said Woodbank.

"Good! In a moment we will consider that point. Just now, let me remind you how I have nursed my hatred. I came to you, after the slaughter, and knowing your overseer had led the assassins, but thinking you innocent, asked for justice. Your manner betrayed your guilt. Then I brought my accusation home. You had me seized and flogged before this very house!"

The avenger leaned forward, his lips parted, revealing his teeth, and his eyes glowed like live coals.

Woodbank's only reply was a groan.

Jarl laughed harshly.

"Poor fool! did you think the chaparral hermit, whom men called mad, or idiotic, had forgotten his vendetta? No! Abbott Woodbank, beware of the smoldering fire, for it is liable to eat widely before being discovered. But, to resume! You say you have repented."

"I have. My life has become a torture to me through remorse—"

"Do not confound it with fear—with apprehension. You repent because you hear the footsteps of vengeance. Many other men are like you in this. But I will test you. It is in my power to shoot you and avenge Neal Belvin's death, but I will spare you on condition that every dollar which is rightfully Florence Riverton's shall be refunded."

"I can't do it."

"Why not?"

"I am not worth a dollar in the world."

Jarl smiled coldly.

"Very true. When you came to Texas you were so anxious to keep your ill-gotten wealth from going back to its rightful owners, that you signed over all you had to your accomplice, Pedro Lopez. He said it was but a farce to head off your enemies. Hal! hal! Farce or not, he failed to give back the papers, and since then he has been the actual owner of this ranch, all the profits of the lawful labor as well as the counterfeiting have gone into his pocket, and he has been a master over the master."

Woodbank sat silent, white, haggard.

"Do you propose to refund?"

"How can I? As you say, Lopez has all, and his heart is of flint, if he has one at all."

Jarl leaned further forward.

"Where are the papers by which he holds you fast?"

"I don't know; I wish to Heaven I did."

"So do I; for it seems to me your only hope is to find them. With Pedro Lopez's illegal claim thrown off, you can refund what you stole from the Rivertons and have a goodly sum left. Manage to get and destroy this paper and you are safe; otherwise I carry out my vendetta, and hold you answerable for Neal's death."

Jarl leaned back in his chair and looked as inexorable as pictured Death, himself.

Woodbank brushed the perspiration from his forehead.

"What can I do? I know nothing of the paper; if I did, I might have been tempted to secure it long ago."

The last words were spoken in an undertone.

"No doubt," said Jarl, grimly. "Well, sir, I am going to leave you now, but you shall see me again. You have heard my ultimatum and may do as you see fit. Find the paper and deliver it to me and you are saved. Consider the matter!"

He arose and departed. Once, he looked back, but Woodbank remained with drooping head, too thoroughly crushed to reply.

Then the hermit stepped from the window and was gone.

The proposition to break into Woodbank's house startled Latimer when made by Tiger-Lily.

He started back a pace.

"Do you see to what alliance with an outlaw is likely to bring you?" the girl warningly asked.

He could not answer at once, but when he did his voice was firm and even:

"If such a desperate thing is really necessary, I believe you can give good reason for it."

"Have you that amount of faith in me?" she softly asked.

"Yes."

"Then I will say that it is not into the house we must break. Listen! Somewhere there is an important paper belonging to Lopez; a paper in which Woodbank once signed over his ranch and all its appurtenances to Lopez, to baffle the claims of those he had wronged. The scheme worked so well that Lopez refused to give up or destroy the deed, and he is to-day owner of Deerfoot Ranch by virtue of that paper, though, of course, not justly so. For years I have endeavored to find it, but it has been a great mystery to know where it is hidden. Now, however, I have a new theory, and a new place to search, and there is a little hope."

"In plain words," said Latimer, "if it was destroyed Abbott Woodbank would be a rich man, and would have the means to refund what is rightfully yours."

"Yes."

"Then I will aid you to the extent of my ability."

"And our friend, Zeb?"

"Is always 'round when there is work to be done," said the Chick, overhearing the last question. "Set out my task and I'll flap my wings, crow, and wade into it. Point out their roosts to be raided and there'll be a mighty hustlin' among their fowls."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

STABBED IN THE BACK.

A look of gratification passed over Tiger-Lily's face.

"With such defenders I feel stronger than ever before," she said, "and I thank you both earnestly. You shall not regret your efforts in my behalf."

"You will find us ready when you call."

"There is no time like the present. Once more, listen! You, Zeb White, have been on what you call a still-hunt for the counterfeiters known to be near here. You have suspected the Texas Vultures. They are innocent. The real counterfeiters are Lopez, Woodbank and their men, and the place of operations is near Woodbank's house."

"I have suspected this!" exclaimed Latimer.

"Damnation be upon it! I didn't!" frankly admitted the Texas Chick. "Why, I never thort o' that coop; darn my boots ef I did!"

But the secret was out at last, and when Tiger-Lily said she hoped to find the paper there, both men were ready to follow her. It did not seem a very promising trail, but it remained a fact that the paper must be somewhere, and as all other reasonable places had been searched in vain it only remained to try that.

So they went toward the counterfeiters' den to make the move which was to decide the matter, for weal or woe.

Once near Woodbank's, Zeb undertook to produce two spades and did so, and then the work of digging into the counterfeiters' den was begun.

The men used the spades and the Vulture Queen kept watch for hostile observers. The hour was late, but it was a desperate deed to dig almost under the windows of the house.

Latimer realized this as he worked and thought of the mutability of human life. He had come to Texas a rather haughty, though kind-hearted, man, who had prided himself on his perfect honor and freedom from compromise.

ing associations. Now, he was wielding the spade in the interests of an outlaw queen, and planning to break into other people's premises.

Yet, his conscience was at rest; he felt morally justified in what he was doing.

In due time their spades went through and the den lay below them. They descended, the lanterns of the counterfeiters were found and utilized and the search began.

Having before visited the den we need not describe it; and as more important events are pressing upon us we need not dwell on the search.

Latimer and Zeb showed no less zeal than the Vulture Queen and their work was thorough. Every corner and crevice was examined; useless papers were found, examined and thrown aside; boxes were torn to pieces; the ground was dug up in places; and every possible device resorted to to find the coveted paper.

Despair was beginning to firmly usurp the place of hope when a cunning hiding-place in one of the posts which supported the roof yielded a fresh package of papers to Latimer's sharp eyes.

He handed them to Tiger-Lily.

Hurriedly she examined them, and then all save one fell from her hands. That one she stood holding fast, and they saw a look of complete joy on her face.

They did not need an explanation and waited patiently for her to speak.

"Search no further," she finally said, in an unsteady voice. "The paper is found!"

Latimer pressed her hand in silence.

"This paper," she continued, "is what gave Deerfoot Ranch to Lopez without the payment of a cent. As I have before explained, Woodbank thought it a mere form, a cunning trick, to place his property out of his hands until I had given up my effort for justice; but Lopez was as shrewd as he was unscrupulous. He refused to surrender the paper and Deerfoot has really, though unjustly, been his for years. Zeb, hold the lantern nearer!"

The Texas Chick obeyed and she thrust the paper into the blaze and watched it dwindle to ashes.

"By that act," she said, "Pedro Lopez's power is destroyed, Abbott Woodbank becomes again the master of Deerfoot and the possessor of wealth from which I can force him to disgorge what is due me by every right. Our work is done, and you, my faithful friends, have my eternal gratitude. May you find friends as true as you have been to me!"

They responded suitably, but there were other points to be considered.

"The hardest part of your work is yet ahead of you," said Latimer. "How shall you subdue Woodbank?"

"I do not imagine it will be hard. I have ample proofs of my identity, and when I face him I believe he will give back what is mine. To effect a refusal is the fact that we can prove him a counterfeiter. He dare not refuse me."

"When shall you confront him?"

"To-morrow. In this work there must be no delay."

"I will go with you," said the Virginian, in a ringing voice. "I have eaten Abbott Woodbank's bread, but not knowing it was furnished by such a wretch. For weal or woe I turn my back upon him, and you can depend on a faithful, if not a valuable, ally."

"Me, too!" added Zeb. "I've doubted ye in ther past, fur which I now feel mean enough ter rob a hen-roost. I couldn't crow above a whisper ef I tried; but I'm in ther gang now, an' I'll show ye I kin use my spurs in a good cause."

She gave a hand to each of them, too deeply affected to speak.

Ten minutes later the den was silent and deserted.

It was a grave, silent, unhappy-looking party that assembled at the Woodbank breakfast-table the following morning. Randal was stern and statue-like; the elder Woodbank was pale, haggard, nervous, and weary-looking; and Constance, usually so light-hearted and gracious, had the appearance of one who had passed a sleepless night, as well as a habit of starting at every sound, like a criminal dreading detection. Crime is a moth which leaves wrinkles on the face while it eats at the brain.

The silent meal had barely been finished when there was a stir at the front door; a peculiar, muffled sound which heralded something unusual and made the family look at each other in dumb inquiry.

Before a word could be spoken the dining-room door was thrown open, and Moza stood on the threshold, her face pale, her hand pressed over her heart.

"Oh, sir!" she faintly exclaimed, "it is Lopez and he is murdered!"

"Murdered!"

Abbott Woodbank repeated the word in a husky voice, starting up from his chair.

"Yes; he has been stabbed, and the men are bringing him in. Look to it, yourself, for mercy's sake!"

The half-breed girl dropped into a chair, but Woodbank was so stunned that he did not move

at once. When he did the rancheros had gone on with their burden, the muffled sounds echoing dully through the house.

Then the ranch-owner managed to gain control of his leaden limbs and followed, with Randal close behind him.

He entered the room expecting to see a corpse, but Pedro Lopez was far from being in that condition. He lay on the bed and his face was ghastly, where not streaked with blood, but there was life in his body and a wild, fierce light in his eyes which told of human passion at its topmost pitch.

"Ah, *Madre de Dios!*" he cried wildly, "are you here? You appear when you are of no use, but one may lie all night on the prairie and have no help. Curses on you all!"

"Believe me, I have but just learned of your injury—"

"Holy Virgin, why should men sleep when Pedro Lopez is bleeding! I curse you all, all!"

"Who has done this deed, Pedro?" Woodbank asked, seeing he was too excited to be reasonable.

"Who, indeed! Who was the man who stabbed me in the back like the coward he was! My curse ever rest upon him! Who struck me down like the dog he is, and left me to bleed alone on the prairie; to die of my wound, or be found and devoured by the wolf who is more manly than he! *Carajo!* I will not die! I will live—live to be avenged on him!"

"So you shall. Your wound shall be cared for and you shall recover. But, let me warn you, you are lessening your chances by yielding to excitement—"

"*Caramba!* how can I do otherwise when my assassin is looking coldly upon me?"

"Be calm, Pedro. He is not here and—"

"He is here! Do you think I know him not! Bah! I am not blind nor dead. Who struck the blow? Who, but yonder accursed dog, Randal Woodbank!"

The elder Woodbank recoiled, but Randal started forward a pace.

"What!" he cried, sharply.

"I repeat it; it was you who stabbed me in the back and left me for dead!"

He pointed a quivering finger at the accused man and his face was convulsed with fury.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

TIGER LILY'S DUEL.

RANDAL'S face had grown a trifle pale, but it expressed what seemed honest indignation.

"Villain, you speak falsely!" he thundered.

"It's true, and you shall hang for the deed. *Carajo!* I will show you that Pedro Lopez is not a dog to be trampled under foot. I will send for an officer, and in the meanwhile my men shall stand over me with drawn knives. We will see if a Lopez is to be served thus."

"Again, I say you are wrong," said Randal, more calmly. "I have not stabbed you in the back nor in any other way, I swear it!"

"I believe my son, Pedro," Abbott Woodbank began, but the Mexican interrupted:

"I care not whether you do or not. I hate you both and will delay showing my power no longer. Deerfoot is mine and I will have the benefit of it. I will have my own!"

"But, Pedro, listen to reason," urged Woodbank, thoroughly alarmed. "We are your friends; Randal has not wounded you; you are mistaken."

"You shall hear!" cried the overseer. "Last night I told Constance plainly that she was to be my wife. She struck me in the face and, when I grasped her arm—a little roughly, perhaps, but naturally—her brother seized and hurled me to the ground. Then he called me a dog, and said that if I dared look at her again he would shoot me. We quarreled, and he went away with threats on his lips. I remained where I was, but fell so deeply into thought that I did not hear the assassin creeping up behind me nor suspect danger until a keen blade was driven into my back. I fell bleeding, dying, I then thought. And there I lay all night, with no one to aid me. *Madre de Dios!* what a night! But I am alive, and I denounce Randal Woodbank as my assassin!"

"Did you see me?"

"No; but it is enough that you threatened to kill me."

"It is not enough; I am innocent, and you cannot prove the charge."

"Do you deny the quarrel?"

Randal was about to speak, when he checked himself, and more slowly answered:

"All in good time. For now it is best to look for the assassin. The ground must bear traces. Father, come with me!"

"Jorge, watch him wherever he goes!" directed Lopez, addressing one of the rancheros, a Mexican like himself.

The Woodbanks hastened out on the piazza, but there suddenly paused. They had met Tiger-Lily, Latimer and The Texas Chick, face to face.

A brief pause followed, which was more eloquent than words. Latimer was the first to speak.

"I have returned, Abbott Woodbank," he gravely, but without perceptible hostility, said, "but I do not come as your guest. As events

have transpired, I no longer crave that standing in your house. You see me in company with a lady who is no friend of yours, and I am here to second her claims for justice."

Abbott Woodbank laid one unsteady hand against a pillar for support.

"You!" he uttered; "you here as the champion of a female outlaw?"

"We will not speak of that. You know her history too well to indulge in useless words. If she has erred, you drove her along the path she has trod. But, sir, we have not come to quarrel, and I trust you will listen to the voice of reason and do tardy justice."

"Walter Latimer, beware what you do!" Randal hotly exclaimed.

"Do not be hasty, Randal. Wait until you learn all in this prolonged life drama, as I have done, and I believe you will uphold me. Your heart is not bad."

"Bad! Dare you talk thus when allied with an outlaw?" the elder Woodbank tremblingly demanded.

"*Caramba!* what will a man not do when he is bewitched by woman?" cried a shrill voice.

All looked, to see Pedro Lopez, supported by two of his men; and the last-comers at the house were amazed to see the change a night had made in his appearance. The shadow of death seemed on his ghostly face.

No one answered, and he spoke again.

"I will take charge here, and show you the lion is not yet dead. Scorpion!"

Tiger-Lily's treacherous lieutenant emerged from behind the tree which grew at the corner of the house.

"Here is one who can speak fairly of the Vulture Queen; who has served in her band until the evil deeds she ordered made his heart sick. He has repented. Behold the Scorpion, seniors, who now turns state's evidence, and will be pardoned by testifying against her. Speak, Scorpion!"

"The story ez too long ter be told now," said the ex-captain, his furtive eyes never looking at the Queen; "and you all know Tiger-Lily. But you don't know just how bad she is. She has planned scores o' murders I never dar'd execute."

The Vulture Queen started impetuously toward him.

"Your words are as false as your heart, Captain Scorpion!" she cried, in a ringing voice. "You lie to ruin me, but by my own single hand I will humble you. You wear a sword; draw it and defend yourself if you dare!"

And from under her wrapper she produced a long, slender sword, herself, and presented the point as no novice would do.

The unexpected act almost turned Latimer into a stone, and made him too dazed for interference, and even Scorpion was dumb with surprise as he mechanically obeyed her.

"Defend yourself!" the Queen incisively cried.

The blades crossed with a clang, while every one looked on in silence. Even Lopez had nothing to say. Afterward, Latimer wondered what spell kept him motionless while the woman he was championing dared all, but just then he was too bewildered to even speak.

Tiger Lily wielded her sword with skill and strength. She pressed Scorpion closely, forcing him to the defensive, and showing a wonderful knowledge of the weapon.

Her antagonist was ill at ease. They had crossed swords before, and he knew her skill more than offset his superior strength. If she desired, the battle would end by his death. On the other side of the tree he had a horse, and toward this he was working.

Anxious before to oblige Lopez, he was more anxious now to look out for himself, and desert the scene altogether.

He looked toward the horse. The act was unfortunate for him. His sword was knocked from his hand, and in a moment more the point of the other blade was at his breast.

"Down on your knees, and beg for mercy!" Tiger-Lily relentlessly cried.

Scorpion resolved to play a last card for victory, and leaping back, uttered a shrill whistle. At the sound his horse darted from behind the tree and swept down toward them; his rein dangling loosely from his neck.

The outlaw worked the chances well, and as the horse was passing him, caught at the rein and attempted to leap to his back; but just as his whole weight was suspended by his hand, Tiger Lily's sword cut the strap with one sweep, and Scorpion fell to the ground, while the horse kept on at full speed.

His last chance was gone!

As he hurriedly arose to his feet, Latimer's hand fell upon his shoulder.

"That'll do," he then said. "Yield yourself a prisoner!"

"I've something to say here," interrupted Lopez. "Yonder woman wields a sword well, but that does not alter the fact that she is an outlaw. Seize her, rancheros!"

"One moment, first!" interrupted Tiger-Lily, in a voice which all instinctively obeyed. "Yonder man says I am an outlaw. I claim that I am not, and I will prove it by the honest men of my band, and good circumstantial evidence.

Listen! Years ago I was adopted by a man named, or rather called, King Leopard. Ostensibly, he and the men who followed him were 'rangers'—really, they were prairie pirates, though I shall always remember King Leopard with gratitude, because he was kind to me.

"When he died I was unanimously elected queen of the band. I took the office on one condition: that plunder and rapine be abandoned, and all lead an honest life. But how were we to live? I will tell you. Texas is not known as a gold-producing State, but in the cave in the range of hills where we have lived, in Thornpath Chaparral, there is gold to be had for the digging. This was one of King Leopard's discoveries.

"Only five of the old band saw fit to follow me in the new departure. The others went elsewhere, and passed from my knowledge. I enlisted five new ones, and with the ten then under my lead, began life in the chaparral mine; and there we have been for years. You have given us the name of outlaws, but we have been honest miners instead. But what of the evil deeds committed around Thornpath Chaparral? I know as little of them as you. I had explained all by supposing every evil deed was naturally laid at our door, but I now suspect wicked men deliberately used our identity.

"Of King Leopard's old followers, but two are now alive, and I know they have played me false. They are Captain Scorpion and The Flea, so called. I now believe they and certain rancheros on this place have really been acting as desperadoes, and that Pedro Lopez has been their active ally, if not the directing power. As for myself, I confess I have now and then appeared to people with a dash and display to frighten them, all of which was very foolish; but I can stand among my fellow-creatures and look them in the face unwaveringly."

Her statement fell on different ears with varied effect, but Lopez heard with a cold sneer. The rancheros were at hand, and nearly all were his tools; so, having no fear as to the result, he patiently bided his time.

"All very pretty in sound," he retorted, "but it will not work here. Justice shall have its due. Men, seize the female fiend!"

He waved his hand to his rancheros and they advanced, but Latimer confronted them with a revolver in each hand.

"Back!" he ordered, "or by my life, I'll shoot the first man who places hands on Tiger-Lily!"

"Me, too!" added the Texas Chick. "I'll cut ther comb o' ther rooster who crows fust. Do you hear me cackle?"

"And I, too, say hold!" supplemented a heavy voice.

And around the corner of the house came Jarl Belvin, with half a dozen men at his back.

CHAPTER XL

THE TEXAS CHICK CLOSES THE STILL-HUNT.

THE coming of the chaparral hermit made an unexpected turn in affairs, for the men who had been willing to obey Pedro Lopez now found themselves outnumbered, and some who had been lukewarm promptly decided not to follow a losing banner.

"If there is to be fighting here," said Jarl, looking at the rancheros with a terrible glare, "you may count in those who have come with me; and it is my belief Lopez will lose in the end. Abbott Woodbank, the day of judgment has come and there must be a closing of the account. Tiger-Lily, let the honest men here know the story of your vendetta against Woodbank."

"It can soon be told," said the Vulture Queen, with a prefatory sigh, but gaining energy as she went on. "Here is the story, so far as I know it. Eight years ago, Abbott Woodbank left Virginia to seek a home in Texas. The change was made because he was hopelessly in debt and his pride would not allow him to lead a humble life among his old associates. So he resolved to seek a new home in an undeveloped land.

"On reaching New Orleans he stayed for a few days at a hotel and there encountered a gentleman named Thomas Riverton. The latter, a Georgian, had been a prominent business man, but, getting old, had retired. A little before the meeting with Woodbank he had an attack of illness, and he was in such feeble mental condition that, while staying at the hotel, he did not have sufficient command of his mental gifts to even let his friends know where he was, or that he was ill. He had mysteriously disappeared from their knowledge.

"Matters were thus situated when Woodbank met him. Mr. Riverton took a fancy to him and confided to him the fact that he had fifty thousand dollars in money with him, which he had received for the sale of property in Louisiana. When Woodbank learned this, his honesty was not proof against the temptation which came to him. He yielded and this is what he did:

"In glowing terms he presented the chances of making a great fortune in Texas, and Mr. Riverton listened until his weakened mind was turned. What was the result? He delivered to Woodbank the fifty thousand dollars, to be

invested for him. What was the result? As soon as the villain secured it, he departed from New Orleans and hastened on to Texas, richer by the stolen fifty thousand dollars.

"Mr. Riverton was left penniless at the hotel, and when his bill became due he had no money, nor could he tell to whom he had given it. The hotel people, who had seen no money except what he paid them, rushed to the conclusion that he was a beggar and impostor and told him so, roughly. Weakened as he was in mind, the sensitive pride of the poor old man was deeply wounded, and he left the hotel. The keepers of the place were not really bad, and would not have turned him out, but he went unseen by them. The next morning he was found floating in the Mississippi, drowned!"

Here Tiger-Lily's voice failed her, and it was several seconds before she could resume.

"Two days after, Florence Riverton, his daughter, a girl of fifteen, arrived, but she came too late to do him good. She found only his body and the mystery—who had taken his money? Luckily, there was a clue. A youth, Neal Belvin by name, employed about the hotel, had heard a part of the conversation between the men, and there could be no doubt but Woodbank had the money. Child that Florence Riverton was, she had ample courage, and she resolved to start on the thief's trail. She did start, with Neal Belvin as her companion. She had no relative to whom she could apply.

"They began the journey with a wagon-train, but on the way a band of Comanches, led by a white man, swooped down on the party. All were slain except the girl, Florence Riverton. She escaped, fell into the protecting hands of King Leopard, and became the Tiger-Lily of the present day."

Dead silence reigned for a moment, and then the Vulture Queen resumed, rapidly:

"Learning the whereabouts of Abbott Woodbank, I have for years been working for revenge. I have had for an ally, Jarl Belvin, who had a mission of vengeance. He was the father of Neal Belvin, who was killed when the wagon-train was attacked. Patiently as a red Indian he had followed the trail until he knew it was Pedro Lopez who led the Comanches, among whom he had once dwelt; and that the Mexican worked with Woodbank's consent. Then Jarl would have struck for vengeance, but I bade him wait. I was very anxious to find a paper in which Woodbank had deeded all his property to Lopez to keep it out of my hands. If I struck then, the paper would be produced, showing Lopez to own all, and I could get no part of my fifty thousand dollars. So, while I hunted everywhere, Jarl waited. And, for months, his daughter, Moza Belvin, has been an inmate of Woodbank house, her identity unknown to its other inmates."

"Yes," said Jarl, in his most terrible voice, "I have waited long, but the delay is past. I am now here for vengeance!"

"Ha! ha!" interrupted Lopez, mockingly, "you will be no better off. I still hold the deed!"

"You do not!" added Tiger-Lily, promptly. "I found it in the counterfeiting-den last night and it is destroyed. You have no hold on the Deerfoot Ranch."

"*Mil demonios!*"

"Ayl!" thundered Jarl, "the paper is found, and with the discovery ends my long delay. To-day—now—Neal Belvin shall be avenged!"

He threw up his rifle, but the Texas Chick stepped in front of him.

"Ef ther other fowls in ther coop will allow me ter raise my cackle, I have one word ter say."

"Say it quick!" Jarl shouted.

"I say there is no occasion for avenging Neal Belvin, for he lives and can care for himself. Vengeance may well rest where wrong began. *I am Neal Belvin!*"

Zeb's peculiar voice gave place to a more melodious one; he cast aside a wig and false beard and stood revealed a young and handsome man. The Texas Chick would be seen no more. The dead was alive; Neal Belvin was resurrected.

"I was not slain the night of the train butchery, though I was stricken down and severely wounded. While the assassins searched for the girl, I had life enough left to slip my coat upon a man who was so hopelessly mangled that I knew the cheat would not be discovered. Then I crawled away and escaped, while Lopez, who had wished to kill me next to Miss Riverton, as I had already discovered from his talk, was not in the least suspicious. I need not dwell on my life after that. Enough to say I was seven years a captive of Apache Indians, among whom I fell, but from whom I managed to escape. I came here in disguise, to track my old enemies down. When I arrived, it was some time before I knew the whole truth. My father was living as a hermit, so-called, and my sister, Moza, was in Woodbank's house. The standing of Tiger-Lily was such that I never suspected her true identity, until the day Lopez led a war-party to the chaparral and I heard her reveal a little of her past. Then, for a time, I thought her as evil as report said, but my eyes are now cleared.

The metamorphosed man turned to Jarl, who was standing in dumb wonder.

"Father," he said, "I trust you will forgive me for keeping your faithful heart sore for nearly a year longer than was necessary, but if I have erred, let me tell one thing I have done for you. You remember the assassin, Pablo, by name, you one day found dead outside your door? He died by my hand, when he was trying to gain entrance to kill you. And now, father, will you receive your prodigal son?"

Without a word Jarl Belvin opened his arms and father and son were united. The group was complete when Moza came to their side with a caress for each.

While all were looking at them, Tiger-Lily was surprised to see a man fall on his knees at her feet. She looked and saw The Flea.

"I deserve a shootin'," he humbly said, "but I'm sorry fur turnin' agin' you, an' I may be able ter say one word or two. Cap'n Scorpion hev long been zer ally o' Pedro Lopez, an' zer hev done robberies an' zer like, throwin zer blame on you. I've been ez bad ez Scorpion. But, even while we war in with Lopez, we would never tell zer way ter get ter zer cave—we war zat faithful—an' zat's zer reason he was no wiser about zer place zan any outsider."

Tiger-Lily did not answer at once, and Latimer pressed forward.

"Perhaps you can explain the assault on me," he said.

"I can, zat. It war made by rancheros o' Lopez's gang, led by zer Scorpion, who slipped away from zer cave unknown to zer Queen. An' zer paper found on you an' signed by zer Queen, was an old one. Lopez planned zer scheme ter get you killed an' not let Woodbank know he had a hand in zer game. I was in this plot, an' ef you wanten, you kin knock me on zer head, but I've done all I could ter even up zer load."

The repentance of the rascal was so undoubtedly genuine that no one thought of molesting him.

"The result of every revelation is to bring fresh villainy to the door of Pedro Lopez," said Latimer, sternly, "and I think we must nurse him back to life and give the hangman work to do."

"Carajo! I will not go alone!" snarled the Mexican. "Randal Woodbank has tried to kill me and I demand his arrest!"

There was a sweep of female garments and Constance Woodbank appeared and fell on her knees. Her face was pale, her eyes tear-redened, and she threw up her hands with a despairing gesture.

"God pity me, a guilty woman!" she cried. "It was I who stabbed Pedro Lopez! He swore I should be his wife, when I hated him so. I think I must have been mad, but I stole up behind him and stabbed him in the back. Tiger-Lily, I have wronged you, too; I wish you would take a knife and strike me to the heart!"

"No!" said the Vulture Queen, her noble face trembling with pity for a sister-woman's temporary fall. "Live, Constance: live to be as happy as I wish you may be."

"A million curses!" shouted Pedro Lopez. "Is there nothing but whining and weeping here? Carajo! I will change the order of things. Here's death for you!"

He fired at Latimer, as he spoke, but the latter dropped flat and the bullet entered Abbott Woodbank's body. Then the assassin turned his revolver toward Tiger-Lily, but before he could press the trigger a bullet went crashing through his head.

Randal Woodbank had avenged his father's death.

Walter Latimer and Florence Riverton, erstwhile the Vulture Queen, had a long and serious talk. He believed her the noblest of women; and she confessed a partiality for him from the hour she first stopped him on the road to see what sort of a man was about to visit her old enemy.

The taking of the watch was a sudden freak, and, really, an excuse for seeing Latimer again. Her sternness on this and other occasions was but assumed. She had long refused to confide in him, even after they came to be on good terms, for there was a possibility he was not so worthy as he seemed and she could not afford to lose a chance for success in her great struggle.

Her explanation was sufficient and a perfect understanding was established between them.

Randal Woodbank meted out justice with exactness and dispatch. His father and Pedro Lopez were dead and there was no one to dispute his will. There was a dark stain on his character, for he had known of the counterfeiting operations, but the matter was quietly dropped and the world was none the wiser. When he had refunded what was due Tiger-Lily, our friends asked no more.

Randal, however, collected what money he could and, accompanied by his sister, Constance, passed forever from the knowledge of their old associates.

Captain Scorpion made his escape and was killed a little after. The Flea departed and was seen no more. Gold finding ceased abruptly in the Vultures' cave and the men became scattered.

The Belvins went to ranching in Texas; and since the time of our story Neal and Moza have both married and are having the happiness they deserve. Jarl's old sternness has disappeared, and when he plays with his grandchildren one would never suspect he was once a pitiless avenger.

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